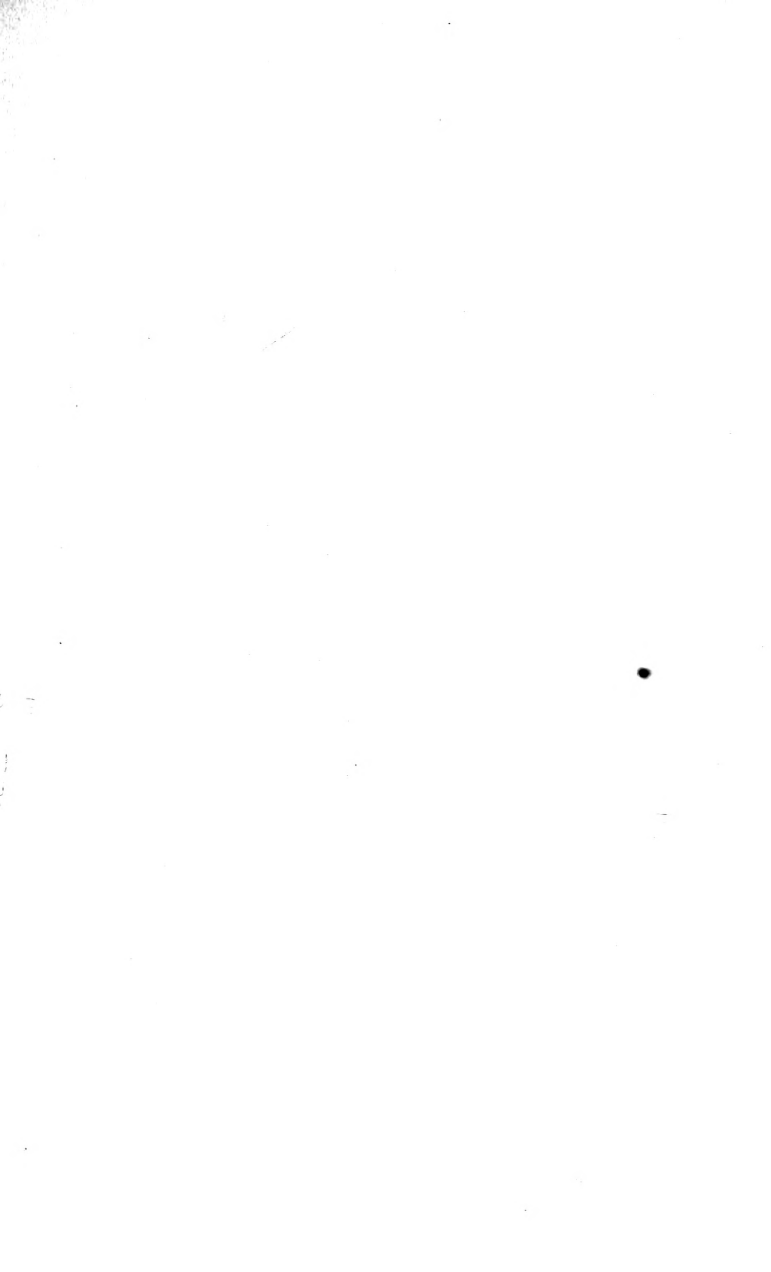


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IN THE OLD PALAZZO.



IN THE OLD PALAZZO.

CHAPTER I.

MR. CONWAY PROPOSES.

THE term of Mrs. Wilding's stay in town was now drawing to a close. The last day had arrived; and it had been settled that when, the next morning, Eveleen and her mother started homewards, Benedetta should at the same time get into the northern express, which would convey her to that town in Yorkshire which was nearest to Lady Dumbarton's residence. Perhaps none of the three were particularly sorry that their London visit had come to an end. Accustomed as they were to the quiet routine of country life, the amount of exertion, mental and physical, demanded of them during the last five weeks, had proved somewhat too fatiguing to be altogether agreeable.

Mrs. Wilding was perhaps the most

exhausted of the trio; added to which, she had a private annoyance of her own, arising out of an altercation which had taken place that morning between her daughter and herself.

“Mama,” Eva had said with considerable energy, “did I overhear you last night inviting Mr. Westmacott, when he left town, to pay us a visit?”

“My dear, he is coming into the country, and will almost pass our very door. It would be absolutely inhospitable not to invite him.”

“Well, if you repeat your invitation, I shall take care not to be at home, that is all.”

“And where will you go, pray?”

“I don’t care—anywhere. I will ask Aunt Dumbarton to take me in. It is perfectly horrid to think of inviting him when you know he has proposed to me several times, and I have refused him.”

“I suppose you needn’t always go on refusing him? I don’t see why I should deny him another chance if he wishes for it.”

"You know that there is no chance, Mama, and that I should only refuse him again. It would be vulgar and unprincipled to meet him in my own house; and I won't do it."

"Upon my word—vulgar and unprincipled! That is pretty strong. I begin to think I have spoilt you, Eva."

"Very likely you have, Mama. All the same, I mean to do as I say."

"And pray," said Mrs. Wilding suddenly, "why shouldn't I ask him for my own pleasure? He is a very agreeable man. How do you know that he mayn't fall in love with *me*?"

Eva glanced at her mother, and then burst out laughing merrily.

"Very true," she said, "though the idea never entered my head before. But, now I come to think of it, you are only forty-seven, and very nice-looking. Very possibly he might take a fancy to you."

"I shall do it one of these days if you go on thwarting me much longer," said Mrs. Wilding.

Eveleen's face became suddenly grave. A

pause of several minutes ensued, broken again by Mrs. Wilding, whose tone had not as yet quite recovered its serenity.

"I am going out to do some shopping," she remarked shortly. "Will you come with me?"

"No, thank you, mama."

"If I am not in for afternoon tea, keep some for me."

"Very well, mama."

"What makes you so sulky, Eva?"

"Am I sulky?"

"Yes, of course you are, as sulky as a bear! And it's my place to be angry, not yours, I should say."

"Just as you like, mama. I renounce you the position with all my heart."

"Come, Eva, don't be a little fool. You know I was only joking."

"Oh, then, of course it's all right. But your tone was not a particularly jocular one."

"Well," said Mrs. Wilding, beginning to regain her temper in proportion as her daughter appeared to lose hers, "I give you

my solemn promise that I won't put a step-father over your head for the next ten years."

"Of course you didn't mean it," said Eva, whose equanimity was quickly restored; "but it doesn't do to joke on such serious matters, mama."

"You little idiot!" said her mother; "do you suppose I am not old enough to know the advantages of freedom?"

And peace being thus re-established, she hurried away to put on her bonnet.

Mrs. Wilding had not left the house many minutes when Raffaello Bartolucci was announced.

He had come to pay his farewell visit. The period of his own stay in England was now nearly at an end; but he had still a week or two longer to spend in town in order satisfactorily to conclude the work for which he had come over. He had one piece of news to give to Benedetta—news affecting himself, which a short time previously would probably have afforded him the deepest satisfaction, but which, in his present state of mind, appeared a matter of little moment, almost of indiffer-

ence to him. He had received a commission to carry out some work at Florence—such a commission, as if successfully completed, might almost certainly prove an opening to better things; and for which he was to start as soon after his return as possible.

Both Eveleen and Benedetta congratulated him warmly; and Eva prognosticated for him all sorts of future successes and well earned laurels.

The young Italian received her kind words with a grateful smile, but his manner was somewhat constrained; and, notwithstanding her liveliness, there were a good many gaps in the conversation. Eveleen fancied she guessed the reason why. It had long been patent to her how deeply in love was poor Raffaello; and, even had this not been the case, it was but natural that, in face of their approaching parting, the young man should wish to have his old playfellow and friend to himself for a few last words. She therefore made the first reasonable excuse she could invent for leaving the pair alone, and when she found that Ino would not accept her

invitation to remain to tea, bade him a most friendly and cordial adieu, begging him by no means to cut short his visit on account of her being obliged to hurry away.

After her departure, however, the conversation languished yet more and more. There was but one thought filling Ino's mind, of which fact Benedetta was fully aware ; and under such circumstances, talk on indifferent topics become somewhat of a farce. There were, however, a few earnest words between them on the subject of the Maestro.

"I shall not see him for long, you know," he remarked. "Only a few days, and then I must be off to Florence. I am sorry to go, for I fear he will miss me."

"He will be quite alone now," said Detta regretfully. "I will, I must go to him soon, Ino, tell him that I am coming—that I will try to come this next autumn if only they will let me." ('If only I can find the money,' was what was in her heart, but this she repressed.) "Tell him that I love him the same as ever ; that I shall never forget those happy evenings when he played to me his own inspirations ;

or the long walks we took together, when Piccola acted as his eyes as we went along."

She had that far-away softened look which was wont to come into her face when she recalled the old Roman days, and specially when she thought on the blind Maestro and his care for her; and was all unconscious of her companion's gaze.

"You have a noble heart, and a memory which forgets not," he said slowly.

And then there was a silence of several minutes between them; after which Rafaelino rose up.

"Must you go already?" asked Benedetta, wishing the parting over, and yet feeling constrained to urge him to remain a little longer.

"I must," he said. "What is the use of delaying longer? There is no hope for me, Piccola; I see it in your face."

There was indeed sufficient answer—more than sufficient—in the look of pained regret which swept across her features.

"Oh, Ino! dear Ino! will you not forget it?"

"No," he replied. "I cannot forget you,

and I will not. "I wish to meet with no other who will be to me what you are."

"In time," she urged.

She had risen too, and was looking pleadingly into his face.

"God forbid!" he said. "I do not wish it. I would rather sorrow without hope, loving you, Benedetta mia, than rejoice in the love of any other woman."

She could say no more. But her heart was full as she placed her two hands within his for a moment, and he kept them in his strong grasp, devouring her face with hungry eyes.

And so they stood together for awhile in silence, she not daring to glance up and read the agitation which she knew was visible on the dark features bent over hers.

"Detta mia," at length he said, and his voice trembled a little, "the last time we parted you were but a little child. You flung your arms round my neck then, and called me your dear brother Ino." His voice had sunk almost to a whisper. "You were but a little child then, I know," he repeated with a soft eagerness.

Benedetta gave one quick glance upwards, while the warm colour rose into her cheeks.

“You can kiss me now if you like,” she said quietly, “and I will say, ‘Good-bye, dear brother Ino,’ again.”

Very reverently the young man bent down, and for a moment pressed his lips to the smooth white forehead. Somehow, the bestowal of that kiss seemed to soothe the bitterness of his trouble, and he felt instinctively that its sweet remembrance would be a source of comfort to him in future days. When he raised his face full of emotion and colour, the wonderful Italian eyes were shining with the sudden beauty of a passing gleam of joy.

“May God protect thee!” he said gently. And the next moment he was gone.

From her seat at the further end of the room, Benedetta could see him as he passed down the street. She watched the look of sadness that came into his face as, for a moment, he slackened his pace, and, unconscious of her observation, gave one last glance to-

wards the house. Then, as the upright, active figure, with its quick grace of movement, turned the street corner, she suddenly rose, and walked towards the window with the tears streaming down her face. Was anybody in the world so good, so true, and so kind as Ino? Would any heart, equally noble, ever love her so entirely? Why could she not have sent him away happy with some little word of hope to cheer his absence? How was it that she loved him so dearly, and yet felt that she could never love him in the way he wished, and in which he loved her?

“By yourself?” asked a well-known voice at her side, and Benedetta turned round with a violent start to encounter Mr. Conway. Something about the deliberate tone and languid manner seemed at the present moment to act as an irritant upon her nerves, while the crimson colour rose rapidly to her cheeks.

“I fear,” said Mr. Conway, “that I have startled you. You did not hear me come in? I met Bartolucci upon the doorstep.”

“Yes,” said Benedetta, a touch of something almost fierce about her tone as she

noticed her companion's gaze straying towards her wet cheeks, and then with polite discretion averting itself, "Ino has been to say good-bye, and I was crying because of that. He has always been like a brother to me."

Mr. Conway muttered something intended for sympathy, and after a moment's silence—which Benedetta made no effort to break, not even moving from her position before the window—turned towards the door.

"I shall see you again to-night," he remarked, "at dinner. I will not stop any longer now. Forgive me, Miss Campbell, for having intruded upon you."

Benedetta suddenly started from her reverie, and came towards him. "Don't go," she said. "I beg your pardon. I am afraid I have been very rude."

"No, indeed," returned Mr. Conway.

"I think," said Benedetta, making her confession and blushing deeply, "I was vexed that you should find me crying. You startled me."

Beresford Conway turned his eyes towards

the sweet, tear-stained face before him. "I wish," he said in a voice she had never heard from him before, "that you could ever think *me* worth shedding a tear over."

He had scarcely finished speaking, before the door opened, and Mrs. Wilding entered, followed by Eva. The conversation became general and animated, and the elder lady was full of regrets at having missed the farewell visit of her pet sculptor. It was a busy, talkative evening; trains had to be looked out and plans discussed, and no one had any opportunity for private reflection upon any subject. But when at last Benedetta was alone in her little room, preparing for the night, it was not merely Ino's last words and his tender farewells which dwelt upon her mind. The remembrance of Mr. Conway's look and tone a few hours before would obtrude itself upon her thoughts. She was by no means a girl disposed to weigh every compliment, or think seriously of every pretty word addressed to her; but, knowing as she did how little disposed was the Honourable Beresford, owing to his self-appreciation, and

perhaps owing also to the warnings of experience—to a lavish distribution of such favours, it was impossible for her not to feel a passing astonishment upon the point. That he meant anything serious she would not for a moment imagine. It had pleased him sometimes of late to say soft words and throw unusual glances in her direction; he was safe, he probably knew, with her; for she was neither likely to discuss his intentions, nor to fall in love with him. And, with a little laugh of amusement on her lips as she thought of Beresford Conway, and a little tender sigh as her mind dwelt on the companion of her childhood, Benedetta, wearied out with the combined effects of packing-up and excitement, fell quickly asleep.

A railway station is not a remarkably good place for communications of a private nature; and yet, perhaps, no other public meeting-place has owned to a larger share of such communications, or could tell so many domestic tales, tragic and comic. The train which, next morning, was to convey Mrs. Wilding and her daughter homewards

started five or ten minutes before that which was destined to carry Benedetta into Yorkshire. So that Mr. Conway, who had politely insisted upon the unwonted exertion of rising at this early hour, in order to escort the ladies to the station, was able to bid farewell to his two cousins without precipitation before he accompanied the latter to her own platform. Having, however, engaged a good place for her in one of the carriages, he led her on for a moment beyond the crowd which surged in front of them, to a comparatively quiet space. Benedetta felt the momentary silence which ensued to be an awkward one—a feeling not diminished when at length Mr. Conway spoke.

“I said something to you yesterday,” he remarked; “I don’t know whether you paid any attention—probably you thought it empty compliment. But it wasn’t.”

Benedetta could think of nothing whatever to say in answer to this. An irresistible and most untimely sense of the ludicrous took possession of her, and she felt it quite possible

that, had she spoken, she might have laughed aloud. She, therefore, kept silence.

"If," continued Mr. Conway, "people—that's to say, my cousins—hadn't come in I might have said more. Miss Campbell," he ended abruptly, "will you be my wife? That's what I was going to say."

There was no inclination to laugh on Detta's part now. She was completely sobered and considerably startled. This was a termination to the London visit to which she had never looked forward. She was so accustomed to consider her companion an essentially non-marrying and self-concentrated man, that the idea that he would deem it necessary to his happiness to make such an avowal would have seemed to her absurd. There was no doubt in her mind as to what she should say, but considerable doubt as to how she should say it; and only the sound of the departing bell hurried her, at length, to open her lips. But, as she turned towards him, Mr. Conway, who had been watching her face, abruptly cut her short.

"Don't speak now," he said; "you need

not answer me now—at least, unless it can be ‘Yes.’ Write to me in a fortnight or three weeks—there is no hurry—you can think it over.”

Next moment she was in her seat in the carriage, and her companion was lifting his hat from his well shaped head, as the train began to puff slowly out of the station.

“What a strange man,” thought Detta, as, with her cheeks a good deal flushed, and her mind a little perturbed by this sudden and unexpected incident, she whizzed northwards in the rapid express. “Considering the many times we have been together, he might have chosen a better place than a railway station to discuss such things.”

Mr. Conway was not a person, however, she decided, to take the step he had done on the impulse of the moment. Therefore, probably he had waited, she thought, until now, because he dared not make love to any one until his cousin Fanny was out of sight. In which matter, and perhaps one or two others, Benedetta’s judgment was harsh, and not altogether just in regard to her new admirer.

CHAPTER XVII.

CUPID ON THE COMMON.

STEYNTON COURT was a picturesque, rambling old house, situated in the midst of picturesque, rambling grounds of considerable extent. It was built on a little eminence, and surrounded by a wide extent of breezy common, which gradually sloped away towards the sea, the blue line of which, two miles or more off, was plainly visible upon the horizon. It was some distance from any town, and not too rich in neighbours, who were represented chiefly by the inhabitants of isolated cottages, a quaint and old-fashioned population. Perhaps it was an odd place for Lady Dumbarton, whose soul delighted in primness, regularity and order, to choose as her habitual residence ; but she was a woman of conservative opinions, and of

perhaps stronger affections than the world at large gave her credit for, and this property had been left her by her husband, a man of wealth, usually residing in Scotland, but who, immediately subsequent to their marriage, had brought his bride hither for a few years—years which had been among the happiest in her life. Since his death, his widow had lived here entirely, save at such times when she was in London or visiting her friends. Long ago she had given up the effort to trim the extensive grounds into that neatness which was her ideal of beauty ; and now only a little formal Dutch garden, laid out just in front of the drawing-room windows, testified to her personal sense of symmetry.

Benedetta was always completely happy at Steynton

If the routine of the house was burdensome to her, and Miss Sparke's company and affected, narrow ways trying, there were always the long scrambling walks, the distant sea to be reached, the precipitous cliffs to be scaled, and the enjoyment of a wild free solitude, which, to the Anglo-Roman maid, was

of itself an intense pleasure. Even at Mrs. Wilding's there was nothing like it. There was more liberty within doors, but far less without. At every turn there were large houses, well made roads, carriages passing and re-passing, a constant sense of company. But here there was no necessity to expect company, or attend to the exigencies of dress. Detta could go out all the live-long day in an old hat and serge dress, hunting up rare ferns, collecting shells, or exploring the rock caves to her heart's content, coming home towards dusk with rosy cheeks and hair disordered by the wind, after hours of health-giving exercise. And then there were the pets—birds and beasts of various kinds, having their abode in the stables a few hundred yards from the house. It was no part of Lady Dumbarton's character to attach herself to the lower creation. With the exception of her own miniature and over-indulged lap-dog, Dandy, she had no liking whatever for pets. But Thompson, the old coachman, who had been with her nearly twenty years, was a privileged person, and allowed to make his

arrangements pretty much his own way, and, he being a great lover of animals, a small menagerie had by degrees domesticated itself within the stable-yard.

Two members of this were especial favourites with Benedetta. One was the watch-dog, Yarrow, and the other was a solemn brown owl that sat all day long blinking on a ledge in the stable which accommodated Lady Dumbarton's two elderly carriage horses, but which at night, according to Thompson's report, was a very lively customer, doing considerable damage amongst the mice that infested the premises. Rollo was very tame, and, whether from innate sociability or sleepiness, made no objection to the caresses even of a comparative stranger like Detta, allowing her to smoothe his soft head and scratch his fluffy neck, while he blinked at her out of the corner of a half-opened eye, and even at times hopped on one leg an inch nearer to her upturned face, gently nibbling her cheek with a non-aggressive beak. When Benedetta started for her daily walk a visit was always first paid to these two friends. Rollo would sometimes

be treated to a grape or other dainty, and then Yarrow would be loosed, and, with a bound of delight, would start with her on her distant explorations, usually directed, not down the carriage-drive, but along the rough cart-track leading across the common towards the sea.

Down this path they were proceeding one afternoon a fortnight or more after her arrival. It was an exceptionally beautiful spring-like day, the sun was brilliant, and Yarrow in the most affectionate of spirits; nevertheless Detta looked a little perturbed, and it was only after a ten minutes' brisk walk in the clear bright sunshine that her face resumed its wonted expression of serenity. The conversation which had just passed between herself and her aunt in the luncheon-room had, in truth, wounded the girl in her tenderest part. A remark that had been dropped by her in all innocence during lunch, and alluding to the presence of Rafaelino Bartolucci in Mrs. Wilding's house, had been the cause of the altercation.

"Do you mean to say," Lady Dumbarton had asked, "that your aunt invited that young

man—positively invited him—to join her daily domestic circle?”

“Yes,” said Detta, “of course he was with us. He often came. Why should he not?”

“There is no ‘of course’ about it,” remarked Lady Dumbarton severely. “Quite the contrary. I did not think even Fanny would have been so injudicious; and after appearing to agree with me so thoroughly as to his being a most undesirable acquaintance!”

Detta flushed crimson with indignant anger.

“Why should he be an undesirable acquaintance?” she asked. “He is far superior to most of the young men who came to us in London.”

“Oh, my dear!” murmured Miss Sparke, “a Papist!”

Benedetta threw her in silence a glance which quenched her.

“You speak too hotly, Benedetta. It is not at all becoming in a young girl, especially when the subject is one of the opposite sex.”

“He is my friend,” she replied, “and has been all my life.”

“Nevertheless,” continued her aunt, disregarding this observation, “I will reply to your question. Neither by birth, position, nor religion, is this young Italian fitted to associate with you. You have had a good English education, Benedetta ; you are placed amongst English ladies and gentlemen. I gave you credit for greater sense. These people were no doubt very kind to you ; but they are a thing of the past. You are in a different sphere now, and must forget foolish foreign reminiscences. It was all very well as a child ; but your friends now must not be chosen from the ranks of artists and fiddlers.”

“My friends will be the same that they always were,” said Detta, restraining herself with difficulty from a more passionate rejoinder. “I am not all an English-woman as you say—my mother was of Italy ; it is as much my country as England. My father loved these people—he lived amongst them, when—the—English were cold and unkind to him. The Maestro was his friend : he is a fiddler, yes—he is a genius that can wring the souls of

men, and bring heavenly music down to earth. Yet he was an English gentleman too."

Her voice softened, and her indignation seemed to fade away. "Poor old Maestro!" she murmured half to herself. "Feeble and ill, and all alone!" "Oh," she said, raising her eyes earnestly towards Lady Dumbarton, "why cannot I go to him again for a little while, aunt, to nurse him?"

"That," replied her aunt tersely, as she rose from the table, "you shall never do with my consent!"

And Benedetta had wandered out sadly enough, to gain what comfort she could for her aggrieved feelings, from the companionship of Yarrow and the bracing effects of air and exercise.

"Benedetta is a stubborn girl," remarked Lady Dumbarton with unwonted heat, to her companion, as they re-entered the drawing-room; "she sticks to those low foreign people out of sheer obstinacy."

"She is very romantic," remarked Miss Sparke, in her soft voice; "did your ladyship remark her extraordinary poetic flights when

she got upon the subject of her old music master? One feels oneself—he, he!” laughed Miss Sparke, “very common clay indeed in her company!”

“She is not usually affected,” replied Lady Dumbarton, who could be just even when angry.

“Affected! O *dear* no! Your ladyship mistakes me. Only a little romantic in her friendship, dear girl.”

“Romantic in fiddlesticks!” exclaimed Lady Dumbarton impolitely. “She is a fool, that is all.”

Meanwhile Benedetta had walked with rapid steps across the common, and had now flung herself down upon a little grassy knoll which was one of her favourite resting-places. A soft west wind was blowing, gently stirring the long grass which rustled all about her, the blue sky was flecked with tiny white cloudlets that scudded eastwards, and the broad azure line of the sea shone and sparkled in the distance.

Yarrow lay beside her in perfect contentment, every now and then lifting his head to

look into her face, or wagging his tail in acknowledgment of a word. Yarrow was no aristocratic collie; he was a thorough sheep-dog, whose immediate progenitors had scoured the northern hills in pursuit of an active and useful calling. His body was covered with short, rough yellow hair, and his tail was but a stump three or four inches long. But, from the neck upwards, he was distinctly and entirely beautiful. His long tawny ruff was thick and handsome, his face beautifully marked, and his eyes peerless even among the eyes of dogs. They were great brown eyes, full of a pathetic earnestness and integrity, and capable of expressing every emotion possible to dog-nature. Detta often thought that they were like Ino's eyes; only, instead of the human passions expressed in his, with Yarrow there was nothing but the self-abnegating love and perfect trust of the canine species.

She lay there for long on the dry, sandy grass—for, although only April, the day was singularly balmy—her thoughts wandering, as they often did, half sadly, half tenderly,

back to the old childish days and the Maestro. She must, she would, get to him somehow this autumn, were it only for a short visit. But, once there, might it not be that she would not return at all? Why was it that this thought caused her a little startled pang? Was not Italy her own country, and Rome her own city? Could she not be content to take up her abode in that large bare room at the top of the Palazzo; where, so long as the Maestro lived, she well knew she would be more than welcome? Had she become so anglicised that the prospect of a return to the old life should trouble her; and so entirely adopted her new country as to grow forgetful of the old one? Ah, no! Rome would always be to her the city of cities; and no one, not even Eva, be as much to her as was the Maestro. Nevertheless, her new home, her new relations had become too dear for her to contemplate leaving them without pain. And she could not but feel it possible also that there might be but little in the way of companionship there to repay her for the loss of her English acquaintances.

As she lay dreaming on, a visitor, whose

advent she little expected, was being ushered in at the Court.

He was an exceedingly polite and cordial visitor, evidently anxious to create a good impression, and to render himself as agreeable as possible to his entertainers. The little dog was inquired after and caressed; Miss Sparke was congratulated on her blooming appearance, and Lady Dumbarton condoled with on account of her recent illness. All of which tended, I fear, to prove that the new arrival was a deceiver. For it was undoubtedly a fact that he detested fat Dandy, had no partiality whatever for the lady companion, and only remembered Lady Dumbarton's rheumatic attack on account of the slight limp which was its legacy.

It was only after a quarter of an hour's call that he ventured to enquire for Miss Campbell; and, being informed she was out, took his departure with no unseemly haste. Indeed the impression he left behind him was so much more pleasing than usual, that, for the first time in her life, Lady Dumbarton allowed her companion to

chant his praises without pulling her up abruptly.

‘After all,’ reflected the former lady to herself, ‘things might go worse than for him to take a fancy to Detta. He is a shallow, conceited person, but he would be better than the other. He is at any rate a man of birth and position, and neither a foreigner nor a Papist.’

Meanwhile Detta—her eyes fixed on the distant sea—was startled from her reverie by a slight gruff bark from Yarrow. She glanced up and saw some one coming towards them through the long grass. In another moment she had recognised Beresford Conway; and rose from the ground. He raised his cap to her, and the girl sprang up lightly as a bird, her slight figure on the little eminence outlined against the sky, as he approached. There was a little increase of colour in her face as she held out her hand, but no confusion about her manner. She would have felt really glad to see Mr. Conway, if it had not been for her dread of a recurrence to the topic started so suddenly and strangely at the London terminus the last time of their meeting.

“I have no doubt you are astonished to see me here,” he remarked as he came up to her, “but I happened to be in the neighbourhood, so I thought I might as well call.”

“You have left Town?” enquired Detta, struck the next moment with a sense of the originality of her remark.

“Yes. I grow more sick of London every year, though one never knows quite what to do with oneself anywhere else in spring. So I joined a friend who was going a walking tour to all the abbeys round here—you know Yorkshire is very full of abbeys. Won’t you sit down again?” he added abruptly.

Detta hesitated.

“I must be going back soon,” she said.

“But not just yet? If you go now I shall feel I have driven you away.”

She reseated herself silently, and Beresford flung himself on the grass beside her, Yarrow lying between them. After all, Mr. Conway could be an agreeable companion enough when he chose; and it was pleasant to talk to somebody less silly and narrow-minded than Miss Sparke, and less precise and severe than

Lady Dumbarton. After a while she began to forget the inevitable subject before them, and to laugh and chat with her neighbour, listening with interest to his account of the commencement of a block of real model lodging-houses which were to take the place of some of the more squalid, broken-down tenements on his London property

“It was a grand victory,” he said. “Old McClure would never have given in but for Mr. Mowbray ; but now he’s bound to admit that decent houses may be made to pay just as well as pigstyes. It seems to me, Miss Campbell, that there is very little benevolence in all these reforms of yours. They promise mostly to be self-paying concerns.”

“I suppose,” said Detta laughing, “the fountains are not self-paying?”

“No, the pumps are about the only things that don’t bring in dividends. What a pretty view you have here, Miss Campbell.”

“It is my favourite nook,” said Detta. “I come here nearly every day.”

“And the dog with you? He is a nice dog,” said Mr. Conway, holding out his hand

to Yarrow, who at once responded to the invitation. "A very nice dog," he repeated, as Yarrow looked up into his face with his noble eyes. "A different sort of beast from that over-fed little lap-dog up at the house."

Benedetta answered by a warm smile as he continued to stroke the rough head. His appreciation of Yarrow did not lessen her regard for him; and as he bent over the dog, she thought she had never seen so pleasant an expression on his face before. He seemed quite a different man from the Mr. Conway she had last seen in London. The languor of his manner was almost gone, and the drawl far less defined, while his tall athletic figure showed to advantage in the rough grey tweed suit he now wore.

Presently he drew her into conversation upon a different subject. "What were you thinking of so profoundly when first I saw you?" he asked. "You were too absorbed to see me until I was close at hand."

"I was thinking of Rome," she replied at once, "and wishing, as I am always wishing

now, that I knew how to get there to see the Maestro once again."

"I know," said Beresford. "You told me all about him—do you remember? that night at Cousin Fanny's dance. You are very fond of him?"

"I love him more dearly than anybody in the world," she replied.

"Better than Ino?" he enquired, after a short pause.

The colour came into her cheeks, and a bright light into the eyes which had been gazing dreamily out upon the distant horizon.

"Why do you always talk to me of Ino?" she asked, a touch of impatient anger in her voice. "I am not in love with him; though," she added, "I love him very, very dearly."

"I beg your pardon," he said, with a strong inward gleam of satisfaction. "I spoke on impulse, and did not mean to be impertinent. Yet," he added with sudden generosity, "it would not be strange if a woman lost her heart to that young man. He is very attractive."

Detta raised her eyes to his with a smile of

cordial sympathy, almost gratitude. She loved to feel that Ino was well thought of and to hear him praised. It seemed to soothe her own upbraidings over the fact that she could not give him that particular love for which he craved.

For some minutes they talked on. Then there came a pause, and Detta's heart sank, for she knew that now the inevitable must come to the front.

And so it did, but after a very quiet and unobtrusive fashion.

"Have you thought it over?" asked Mr. Conway. "Do you—think it possible?"

Detta was silent for a moment. He had been so kind, so pleasant that morning, that she felt loath to pain him, even though the pain were, as she suspected, a very slight and fleeting one.

"I am afraid—" she began. Then she suddenly raised her earnest eyes and glowing cheeks towards him. "Oh, Mr. Conway! why on earth should you want *me*? You see such heaps of people—nice girls, much better and grander than I am in every way. Why

should you want me?" she asked, her eloquence coming to an abrupt conclusion.

"I want you," he replied, returning her glance calmly, "because you are the first girl I ever met who is perfectly simple, perfectly natural, and perfectly straightforward. But that isn't the only reason," he continued, suddenly turning away and decapitating the grasses with his stick. "It was at first, but there's another now. You have grown dear to me, Benedetta"

Detta was more touched than she would have believed possible by this quiet and unromantic declaration. How different it was from the rush of passionate eloquence, from the intense fervour expressed by poor Ino when he made love to her! And yet, somehow, the few words that passed as by an effort from Mr. Conway's lips left her under the impression of an equal reality and a similar strength. She answered him sadly enough. "It's no good," she said. "I am afraid I am hard. Oh, Mr. Conway, I am so sorry."

"Never mind," he replied. "I shan't give up. I am awfully pig-headed when I have

made up my mind to anything. And, until I hear you are going to marry somebody else, I shall stick to it. But don't be afraid, I'm not going to pester you."

"It seems so old," said Detta, "that you should trouble yourself to care about me. Eveleen has often told me that you could marry almost anyone you liked."

"Perhaps that's the reason I've never thought of marrying until now," he replied. "Game that requires no stalking is of little value in one's eyes. If you hadn't snubbed me at first, Miss Campbell, perhaps I might never have thought of this."

"Did I snub you?" asked Benedetta. "It was very impertinent of me, only just from school."

"To snub a man of my advanced age?" he asked. "Precisely. That was your great charm. Your serious eyes often looked at me with a certain perplexity, almost disgust. It was a new experience. Confess now, Miss Campbell, you thought very badly of me at first?"

"No, not badly exactly," said Detta.

“But,” she added with a straight-forward simplicity, “you did puzzle me, and I thought you perhaps—a little—unreal.”

“Affected, you mean,” was the calm rejoinder. “As you grow older, Miss Campbell, you will find that everybody in this world is more or less unreal.”

“I hope not,” said Detta. “Aunt Dumbarton is never unreal,” she added.

“Then she is disagreeable instead,” he replied promptly. “As a rule, what are called sincere people feel it their duty to make themselves very unpleasant to those about them.”

Then, as Detta rose up and began to return homewards, he turned with her, walking slowly by her side. When at length they reached the point where the path divided, on one hand leading to the drive, on the other to the high road, he stood still.

“I must say good-bye here,” he said. “Lawless,” he added with a short laugh, “will wonder what has become of me. I left him writing his letters in the inn-parlour, telling him I was going just for a turn.

Good-bye, Miss Campbell. It is possible I may turn up again at the end of ten days. We shall have had enough of the abbey by then, I daresay."

"I shall be very glad," replied Detta, more in answer to his looks than his words. Yet something in her face prompted his next remark.

"There need be no recurrence—then—of unpleasant topics, you know," he said. "I am in no hurry. We shall be friends, shall we not, as before?"

"Of course! You have been so very kind," she added after a moment, suddenly burdened by the feeling that she had never sufficiently appreciated him; and the remembrance that, notwithstanding the apparent apathy of this apparently worldly man, he had nevertheless, in all domestic events and family discussions of which she had been cognisant, invariably taken the unworldly and high-principled side. It suddenly flashed upon her that she owed him a mental apology for the low estimate she had at first formed of his character; and also that, since the

commencement of their acquaintance, he had treated her not only with kindness, but with that respect for her opinion, that unspoken sympathy with what her aunt called her odd foreign thoughts and ways, which was even more flattering to a girl of her disposition as coming from one so much her senior. But the consideration that she could not well apologise without stating the nature of her offence, and that her thanks might possibly be misunderstood, caused her to hesitate.

“What have I been kind about?” he asked, seeing that she paused. “In wanting to marry you?”

“I did not mean that,” said Detta crimsoning; “though of course that is very kind of you, I suppose, and very astonishing——”

“It couldn’t astonish anybody more than it does myself,” said Mr. Conway naïvely. “I never proposed to anybody since I was nineteen—thirteen years ago.”

“You speak as if plenty of people had proposed to *you*!” observed Detta, who thought that if he could so easily joke

upon the subject, she also might be excused a little lightness.

"So they have," he returned coolly; "a fair proportion. Don't look disgusted, Miss Campbell."

"I am," said Detta. "I don't like to hear girls spoken of in that way."

"Most of them weren't girls," he returned. "But all girls are not like you."

"Many are a great deal better—a great deal nobler than I am."

"Then they would be too good, too noble for me," he rejoined. "Good-bye."

He held her hand in his for a moment; and then dropping it and raising his cap, half turned away; but the next moment came back. "Whatever happens, you know," he said, "it will make no difference—a—to the Model Lodging Houses."

And, before Detta had decided whether he was serious or in joke, he was already half way down the hill towards the high road, covering the distance quickly, despite his easy, half-lounging step.

For a moment she stood still, feeling half

inclined to laugh. It was difficult to realize that the tall figure walking so leisurely away with so undisturbed a countenance could belong to a man who less than half an hour ago had made her an offer of marriage, and been refused. How different it had all been from poor Ino's love-making! There was nothing in this man's manner to move her feelings—no fire, no passion—it almost seemed at times as if he were making fun both of himself and her. Did he really care about her? and if so, was it only an illustration of the phlegmatic coolness of the English character? Then, something rose up within her and asserted boldly that, notwithstanding his lack of asseveration or outward emotion, the Englishman had spoken the truth when he told her that he should be constant to his present purpose.

Life was quiet enough at Steynton Court, and stirring events but few; so that Benedetta had no lack of leisure to give to this new subject for reflection, and it must be confessed that for the next few days it occupied a considerable place in her mind. On re-entering the drawing-room, she found her

aunt leaning back in an easy chair, listening to a book read aloud by Miss Sparke, and which, judging from her frequent yawns, she found far from entertaining.

"There! that will do, Sparke," she said as Detta came in. "I have no doubt he is a very deep young man, but he's very wordy and very dull. I can quite believe that the study of prophecy has driven more people out of their minds than any other subject."

For Lady Dumbarton, in her own domestic circle, and after her own grim fashion, could occasionally condescend to jokes even upon a serious subject. "Mr. Conway has been here, Detta," she observed.

"Yes," replied her niece, "I met him, and he stopped and talked to me."

"On a tour with Robert Lawless. I know his family well—second son of Lord Fennimore—a very steady, superior young man, I believe. I told Mr. Conway to bring him here to lunch if they returned this way, as he seemed to think probable."

"Most agreeable, Mr. Conway was," remarked Miss Sparke. "So kind about every-

thing. He is a most gentlemanly, pleasing person."

"Ah!" said Lady Dumbarton, with grim humour, "we all know you are in love with Mr. Conway, Sparke. He is certainly a gentlemanly young man, however, and for reasons of his own made himself very polite here to-day. But he is of the world, worldly."

"Worldly, yes," said Miss Sparke, beginning to recover from her blushes. "He needs awakening, he is not as yet alive, it is to be feared, to his immortal interests. But the soil is good—the seed only requires planting."

"It's no good *your* trying to plant it, Sparke," observed Lady Dumbarton ironically, pursuing her victim without mercy; "if any woman ever plants *that* seed, it will be a young and pretty one, not a plain and elderly one."

And Miss Sparke was so completely crushed by this retort, that, notwithstanding the strong distaste, almost aversion, which she felt for her aunt's companion, Detta could have found it in her heart to pity her.

CHAPTER III.

THE MAJOR'S CONFIDENCES.

THE next few days passed quietly enough, without incident of any kind, save the usual variations of spring weather, to mark their coming and going. But, one morning, about a week after Mr. Conway's call, a note arrived for Lady Dumbarton which appeared to give her pleasure.

"It is an invitation to lunch," she said, "and I am asked to bring you, Detta. It is from my old friend, Mrs. Aynsley, of Cragshaw Castle. She has been prevented by a bad cold from coming to see me the last few weeks, and I fancy you have never met her. But she is very anxious I should come over to day to meet her nephew, Major Drew, who arrived unexpectedly from abroad last night. I shall certainly go. I have a great regard for

Arthur Drew. I have known him from a child, and think most highly of him. You must be ready to start by twelve, Benedetta, for it is a long drive."

Cragslow Castle, notwithstanding its imposing title, was, although a very ancient, not a very handsome or commodious residence. Part of it was quite out of repair, and had almost fallen into ruins; and only one wing was occupied by the present owner, whose whole establishment intimated the fact that her means were of but moderate proportions. The grounds, too, were straggling and untidy, requiring the attention of those gardeners which it was not within the scope of Mrs. Aynsley's income to employ. But within the house everything seemed to take its tone from the bright, active, cheery little mistress, who, although a solitary, elderly woman, more than half an invalid, struck Benedetta as having the sweetest face and the pleasantest expression she had seen for a long time.

There were no men-servants to wait at Cragslow Castle. Neat, civil little maids served the guests during the well appointed

but unpretentious lunch, with a cordial alacrity that was almost akin to hospitality. The visitor, too, pleased Detta at first sight. He was a big, strong man, with a bronzed face and dark brown curling hair, among which shone here and there a silver thread or two. He was the military man all over, with his stiff upright deportment, his heavy moustache and clean shaven chin, and with an expression of kindly mirth and of honesty in his blue eyes which could not fail to render him attractive. The luncheon passed off pleasantly enough, almost merrily; and Detta was astonished to find how far her aunt, in the society of those she had long known and cordially liked, could unbend her usual rigidity of manner.

Lady Dumbarton became almost genial herself under the combined influence of two such genial people as Mrs. Aynsley and Major Drew; and her niece perceived that the regard which she extended to the latter was as evidently cordially reciprocated by him.

After lunch they strolled about the garden, and here, for the first time, Detta learnt that

Major Drew was acquainted with her relations at Ashley Manor. Mrs. Wilding's name had been once mentioned incidentally during the meal by Lady Dumbarton, but it was only *en passant*, and the subject had been taken up by no one at the time. Detta was astonished now to find how much the new arrival seemed to know of both her aunt and cousin, and was impressed by the unconcealed eagerness he displayed in his questions concerning them.

"Still in the same old place," he said musingly. "It is six years ago since I was there—more than that. It seems a long time to me. I have been in so many different parts. Is your cousin changed, Miss Campbell?"

"I cannot tell," she said hesitating. "Though it is just six years, too, since I came to England and first saw Eva."

"Is it indeed?" he asked, looking at her with interest.

"I was quite a child then," said Detta, "and children don't notice changes in people."

"Of course, you would be a child," he

murmured. "But, after all," he added quickly, "Eva—Miss Wilding, I mean—is young still."

"She is seven or eight-and-twenty," said Detta.

"Not twenty-eight till next July," remarked Major Drew, his well-tanned face reddening a little so soon as he had spoken.

A suspicion, which for the last half hour had been dimly defining itself, now began to take clear outlines in Detta's mind.

"Aunt," she said, when they had made their farewells, and were driving back to Steynton Court at the usual funereal pace suitable to the age and infirmities of the two antique carriage horses and the almost equally antique coachman, "do tell me who is this Major Drew? Is he——" she paused.

"I know what you are going to ask," replied her aunt, "and I will answer you. Major Drew is the man to whom your cousin Eva was engaged six or seven years ago—the match which your Aunt Fanny broke off, as she would not allow her daughter to marry on six hundred a year. It isn't a fortune, I

admit ; but good birth and high principle are worth something, and a man of ability like Arthur Drew always has a hope of bettering his prospects. I did not blame her much at the time—Arthur Drew was a great deal too good for her daughter—and she has always been a worldly woman. But I don't see what she has gained by throwing him over, and putting Eveleen to set her cap by turns at all the county bachelors !”

A pink flush rushed to Detta's cheeks, and indignant words to her lips. The one subject of discord between herself and Lady Dumbarton was her cousin Eveleen. Sneers against herself were few and comparatively easy to bear—even Mrs. Wilding's name she could silently allow to pass under the fire of some withering denunciation—but Eva, dear, kind Eva, whose heart, notwithstanding her bringing up, was so affectionate, and the depth of whose nature was hidden from all those between whom and herself, as was the case here, there existed neither sympathy nor regard—Eva should not be traduced before her !

"She never set her cap at anybody in her whole life!" she exclaimed hotly.

"You have known her for so long a period of her life, have you not?" asked her aunt drily.

"It doesn't matter," returned the girl. "No one knows her heart better than I do."

"That must be a priceless advantage to you, I should say," remarked the other, not over pleased by this ebullition.

"And as for Major Drew, he is very nice, no doubt; but I don't think any man could possibly be too good for Eva."

"Well, at any rate," said her aunt; "I hope he won't be such a fool as to try it on again. If he asks my advice, that is what I shall say to him."

"And if," said Detta, with equal firmness, "he asks mine, I shall tell him the reverse!"

"Does it not strike you," remarked Lady Dumbarton somewhat severely, "that your observations, considering your age, are a little forward, not to say impertinent, Benedetta?"

And her niece receiving this rebuke in silence, the conversation ceased.

Two or three days later Benedetta was walking in the direction of the stables with the purpose of escorting Yarrow to his kennel, it being not far from lunch time. She had just entered the yard when she heard the sound of horse's hoofs behind her, and, glancing round, perceived Major Drew coming through the gateway. He jumped down, and giving the reins to Thompson, whom he saluted as an old friend, came towards her with a smile, shaking hands cordially.

"I took it for granted Lady Dumbarton would be in at this hour," he said. "It looks like asking myself to lunch, does it not? Such a glorious day for a ride. And you and this old fellow have been for a walk?"

"We have been out since ten o'clock," she replied, as Major Drew bent to fasten the dog's collar for her.

"You look like it," he remarked, glancing with admiration at the healthy brightness and colour on her fresh young face.

"It's a good sight for sair 'een to see you

again, Captain Drew," said the old coachman appearing at the stable door, and smilingly re-touching his hat. "You've been in a many foreign parts since we last saw you here, I reckon—pretty nigh round the world, I dare say?"

"Oh, no, Thompson," laughed the major, "not quite that. I have been most of the time in India, north or south. But I am right glad to see this place again. We must have a good chat about old times before I go, Thompson."

"Yes, sir; if you please, sir," said Thompson, disappearing again into his stables.

"That old fellow has known me ever since I was a lad," said Drew, as he and his companion made their way out of the yard together. "I spent all my holidays with my aunt, Mrs. Aynsley, when I was a boy. Cragshaw Castle was my home; and I remember Lady Dumbarton all my life. Some people think her stiff, but she has always been very kind to me."

"You are a great favourite with her," remarked Detta.

“And yet I remember as a boy often saying and doing most dreadfully impudent things in this house, besides once hopelessly disgracing myself by pulling the dining-room clock to pieces when I happened to be left alone with it.”

“Every boy does that at least once in his life,” she observed smiling.

“I have come to say good-bye to-day. I have made up my mind to be off to-morrow. I hope we shall meet again some time, somewhere, Miss Campbell?”

Detta was but a woman, and was not absolutely devoid of woman’s curiosity, at any rate where the subject was in any way connected with one she loved.

So she could not resist a little harmless shaft.

“Perhaps,” she said, “we may meet at Ashley Manor, as you know my aunt and cousin.”

Her companion’s bronzed face flushed a deeper colour, and he suddenly slackened his pace.

“Miss Campbell,” he said, “I feel I should

like to tell you something. You have a look about you that invites confidence. You are almost a stranger to me ; but I am sure," and he paused a moment, "that you love *her* very dearly. Did you ever know that I was engaged to your cousin some years ago?" Then, before she could answer him, he continued eagerly : "Did she ever tell you of that time — ever speak of me to you?"

"Not by name," replied Detta hesitating. "You see I was a child then. But, not long ago, she spoke once of somebody that I think must have been you."

"Do you really think it?" he asked, his face radiant. "It is a long time, is it not, Miss Campbell? Nearly seven years, and not a word or line between us all the while. But, at any rate, she is single. That is the first thing I found out when I got back to England. And it can't be for want of offers."

"Eva has refused people, I know," remarked her cousin.

"Of course," he said proudly ; "half the men she met were always mad after her. So that is a good sign, is it not, Miss Campbell?"

“I should say so,” said Detta, smiling; as her companion, too intent upon the conversation to be well aware what he was doing, turned round on approaching the end of the shrubbery, and began to pace slowly back again in the opposite direction.

“Well, at any rate, I’m going to try my luck there again. So long as there’s nobody else, there’s a hope. And that’s far more than I ever expected. I couldn’t stop in England and not try again. Things are a little better with me now than they were then; and perhaps Mrs. Wilding may be more amenable to argument. If—if matters go as I wish them, and if she isn’t—why then, Miss Campbell, after all,” and Drew lifted a happy, smiling face, “it is possible to do without one’s mother-in-law! Though I hope it may never come to that. And you really think I have a chance? You do not think I am mad to rush down there and expect her to remember me after a seven years’ absence?”

“Eva has a long memory, I think,” said her cousin thoughtfully.

“God bless her!” exclaimed Drew

reverently. Then he held out his hand for Detta's, and gave it an almost painful pressure. "You have made me very happy," he said; "I can't thank you as I wish. I had made up my mind to go; and now you have given me extra courage, and I begin to feel I shall be successful."

"I know nothing," said Detta. "But I certainly say to you, 'go and try.'"

"And if," he said, "it all comes right and I am successful, I shall not forget that it was you who gave me hope and encouragement to go."

There was a cordial exchange of sympathy on Detta's face; but she made no reply in words, as together they entered the house.

Major Drew was, as he expected, asked to stop luncheon; and, bright as was evidently his natural disposition, Detta could not help feeling secretly amused to perceive her aunt's curiosity as to the cause of the exuberant and boyish high spirits that had to-day taken possession of him. She could not help picturing to herself that lady's probable indignation had she been made aware of the

fact of the secret understanding that existed between the major and herself. But, having a shrewd remembrance (as no doubt he had) of Lady Dumbarton's very limited regard for her niece Eva, Major Drew was perhaps not likely to make her the early recipient of his confidences.

They had already seated themselves at table when the door bell rang, and another arrival was announced—no less a person than Mr. Beresford Conway. He was shown into the dining-room, and approached Lady Dumbarton apologetically. "I have come at an awkward hour, I fear, and am disturbing you at your lunch."

"By no means," she said politely; "you are just in time. Is not Mr. Lawless with you?"

"Impossible, I regret to say. He is so done up he cannot walk another mile, and no conveyance of any kind was to be had at the enlightened village where we are stopping. In fact I think I—a—left him in bed. But he begged me to return cordial thanks for your invitation."

Then, as he turned round to greet the other ladies, Mr. Conway gave a sudden start of surprise "Drew!" he exclaimed, in a tone more nearly representing delight than Detta would have given his voice credit for possessing, "where have you fallen from?"

"From Cragslow first," said the other. "Before that, from Simla." And the two shook hands with that silent prolonged clasp which, amongst the less demonstrative members of the English male community corresponds to half-a-dozen kisses on either cheek and a rush of excited salutation from our continental neighbours.

"This is a bit of luck I didn't anticipate," said Drew, so soon as Mr. Conway had greeted the other members of the party and had seated himself at the table. "I never expected to find you out of London at this time of the year, Conway."

"Mr. Conway is taking a walking tour," said Lady Dumbarton. "He is waking up at last to the fact that there may be something worth looking at outside London, and is

going the round of our beautiful Yorkshire abbeys."

Mr. Conway had intended his hostess to reply for him. It was a little trick he had when any remark was made to which it did not suit him to respond—pausing sufficiently long to induce someone else to step into the breach—a stratagem which, as in the present case, generally succeeded. Nevertheless, he avoided Major Drew's eyes as that gentleman innocently replied. "Indeed!" he said, with a perplexed air. "That is a new line for you, is it not, Conway? You never used to strike me as being particularly fond of abbeys or indeed anything rural, unless it was in the way of sport, in the old days."

"Many of us improve as life goes on," remarked Mr. Conway coolly, as he gazed serenely into his plate. "I have been studying art a good deal this spring; and now I am going in for nature."

"Oh, indeed!" repeated his friend, still half-puzzled. "Plenty of opportunities for studying art in London, they tell me. Is

it true, Miss Campbell, that ladies are not in the fashion now unless they adorn their heads with other people's hair? That is a scandal that has penetrated to India."

"What was it you said about leaving to-morrow?" Mr. Conway enquired, turning towards his friend as the ladies rose from the luncheon table.

"Why are you in such a hurry? Where are you off to?"

"I am going," Detta heard the Major reply, "to—to the midland counties—to pay some visits."

He wisely left the first question unanswered; and there was no time for prolonged conversation of a private nature, so that the secret which had been confided to Detta was still, it seemed, unshared even by Mr. Conway. But, had her back not been turned towards the pair, she might have perceived the quick glance of inquiry on the one face, and the answering look of consciousness upon the other, and satisfied herself that the new-comer had arrived at

a tolerably correct suspicion of the state of affairs.

She was not left long in doubt, however, upon this point. Shortly after lunch, Major Drew rose to bid adieu to his hostess; and whilst still addressing her, Miss Sparke being beside them, Mr. Conway managed to drop a few confidential words in Benedetta's direction.

"I see you know it all," he said. "I suppose he has told you? He is the best fellow in the world. I think he'll win this time; don't you?"

Detta had barely time to glance back an acquiescent answer, before the visitor turned towards her, saying good-bye with a long hand-clasp and a smile of understanding.

The two friends walked together down the drive; and after seeing the major off, Mr. Conway retraced his steps to make his own adieux.

"Are you returning to London now?" enquired Lady Dumbarton.

"For a time, I suppose," he replied. "But I have some thoughts of going abroad

presently. If you visit your old Maestro, Miss Campbell, it is possible that we may meet in Rome."

"My niece," remarked Lady Dumbarton, somewhat stiffly, "will have no opportunity, that I am aware of, of visiting Italy this year."

"Indeed? I am sorry to hear it. Then, Miss Campbell, you must let me know, if I go, whether I can take any message from you to him?"

"You are very kind," she said, vaguely.

"Probably," said Mr. Conway, "I shall also pay a call upon our friend Ino, if he be then in Rome. He invited me, when in London, to visit his studio."

"Is that the artist?" enquired Lady Dumbarton, with something as nearly approaching a sniff as it would be possible for a person of rank to indulge in.

"He is a genius," said Mr. Conway; "so they tell me. I never had the pleasure of knowing a genius before; but certainly did not think they could be such pleasant fellows."

CHAPTER IV.

MERITS AND DEMERITS.

EVELEEN was a bright correspondent, whose letters were always popular amongst her friends; but never had Detta torn open with so much eagerness an envelope directed in the well-known hand as that which arrived a few days after this date. The sheet was very full, although evidently hurriedly dashed off; and, when Detta perceived at the end of it a few lines written in a manly hand, she knew at once that all was well.

“My darling Benedetta,” the letter began, “I don’t see much use in writing to you, as, of course, you know what I am going to say. But it is a relief to write to somebody who cares for me and who knows *him*. Besides which, as Arthur says, you deserve the first letter for giving him your sympathy, like the

good, sweet girl that you are. But, you funny little stupid prudent thing, fancy only telling him to *hope*! Why, of *course* there was no doubt about it. But you are quite right to keep up the dignity of the sex. My dear, I never was so much astonished in my life as when I saw his dear old figure coming tramping up the drive. I didn't even know he was in England. It was all settled in five minutes, before mama came in; and now I know why I never could bear any of those Galloways or Westmacotts or people. Of course, it was Arthur's fault all the time, though I tried to delude myself into thinking I had forgotten all about him. Naturally, mama was anything but amiable at first; but I am old enough to know my own mind now, and stick to it; and not all the mothers in Christendom should set me against Arthur. Poor mama! I suppose I am a disappointing daughter; but really, she was very nasty at first—actually flung Sir Peter in his face—and he, poor fellow--I mean Arthur—was just as meek as a lamb, and said he knew it was a dreadful match for me, and quite a

sacrifice, and all that sort of rubbish. So at last I lost patience, and finding Arthur wouldn't fight, determined *I* would. So I told mama if I didn't marry Arthur I'd marry nobody else all the days of my life; but that I was quite determined to marry him, and if she wouldn't give her consent, we'd do without it. I suppose it was very naughty of me, and I think even Arthur was frightened when he saw what a virago his future wife could be. But I completely quenched mama. And, having once given in, she is as mild as butter, and growing quite fond of Arthur, which, indeed, she can't well help, as he treats her almost as affectionately as he does me, and a great deal more politely!" Over this sentence was written, in a man's hand, the single word "Fibs." "No, it isn't," went on Eva, "it is quite true; but we will spare you a lover's dialogue on paper. I shall write again in a few days, dear Detta, and tell you all our plans and ideas. I can't think rationally of anything with this great heavy creature hanging over my shoulder all the time. One thing more,

however—Arthur declares mama shall come and live with us when we are married. Isn't it forgiving of him? And though of course, at present, mama swears that that shall never be, yet equally of course the thought is a great solace to her; and I daresay, at some future time, you will see us all inhabiting the same cage together as peacefully as the typical cat, mouse and sparrow, or any other well-trained Happy Family. But that is only in case you marry somebody, too, presently. If you don't do that ('which of course she will,' Arthur says—he's grown so conceited since his engagement, that he thinks no girl can possibly be happy without a man of her own to run after)—I hope then you will always stop and take care of mama, and keep house for her when she grows old. You two would be so snug together—almost as snug as Arthur and me." "Not quite" was written after this in the Major's hand. "Arthur is so determined to write to you, that I will let him finish the letter himself—Your loving cousin,

“EVA.”

Then came Major Drew's addition, written across the top of his betrothed's sheet :

“Dear cousin Detta, Eva has told you all the news, so I have little to say, except to add one item in my present condition of bliss, which she has omitted to mention, and which is the acquisition of so sweet and charming a new cousin as yourself. I knew we should be friends from the first moment I saw you ; and it is delightful to think that now we shall be relations. I am afraid Mrs. Wilding has little chance of her housekeeper, unless, indeed, your heart is as hard as Eva's has been for the last six years.” He had subscribed himself “your affectionate cousin, Arthur Drew ;” but through this, Eva had evidently drawn her pen, and had written in indignant protest—“No, I will not put up with that! The line must be drawn somewhere, and I must make a stand at once, if I mean to be respected.”

“Well, Detta,” said Lady Dumbarton, observing the colour that flushed her niece's

cheeks, and the absorbed attention with which she perused her letter, "your correspondence appears to interest you to-day. Might I enquire if it is from your cousin?"

"O, aunt!" exclaimed the girl, lifting a face full of eager delight, "Eveleen is engaged to Major Drew!"

There was a moment's pause before Lady Dumbarton replied.

"He has been very precipitate about it," she said. "Well, I hope he has not thrown himself away. He is a good, steady man. I only hope she will not prove a light and frivolous wife to him. He has had a wonderful infatuation for her all these years."

"Aunt," said Detta earnestly, "Eva is not light or frivolous"

"She has always appeared so to me," remarked the elder lady drily.

"But that is only," said Detta quickly, "because she is proud, and cannot shew herself in her true colours to those who judge her hardly."

"Do I judge her hardly?" enquired Lady

Dumbarton. Then, annoyed that the girl gave her no answer, she repeated her question in a more peremptory tone.

Thus pressed, Detta raised her candid eyes towards her aunt.

“I do not think you understand her,” she said. “She is naturally reserved; and you do not give her credit for the high principle and deep feelings she possesses.”

“I must be a very obtuse and uncharitable person,” remarked Lady Dumbarton.

The colour deepened in Detta’s cheeks. “I am very sorry, aunt,” she said; “indeed I did not mean to be rude; but you did ask me, you know.”

“Yes,” said Lady Dumbarton, “I did ask you; and you young ladies have not much difficulty in giving your opinion on any subject now-a-days.”

Detta was silent for a moment; then she turned once more towards her aunt.

“You have always been so very kind to me,” she said. “Though you are vexed with me now, yet I always feel you judge *me* more kindly than I deserve. But it is so different

with Eva; everything she does seems wrong in your eyes."

"The quality of penetration appears to be well developed in me," remarked her aunt, in the same sarcastic tone.

Then her manner suddenly changed. "I judge you leniently, Detta," she said, "because, although you have many faults, yet you are by nature sincere, and have, strange to say, notwithstanding your Italian origin, little of that frivolity which so painfully characterises your cousin, and—truth compels me also to say—her mother."

"Think how she has stuck to Major Drew, Aunt Dumbarton," observed Detta; "and the good matches she has refused for his sake."

"Well," said the elder lady, "now that they are engaged, and certainly appear to know their own minds, there remains little more to be said upon the subject; and I can only hope she will make him the wife so worthy a man deserves; though, had he applied to me for advice, I might possibly not have recommended him to take the step."

Detta fortunately was of a tolerably prudent and reticent disposition ; otherwise she might have found it hard at this juncture to renounce the little triumph she might have gained had she informed her companion of the part she had been called upon to play as confidante and adviser to Major Drew not many days ago. She held her peace therefore, thereby allowing room for one of Miss Sparke's faint interpolations.

“ A very precipitate young man,” she murmured. “ It seems almost strange that he, such an old friend, so accustomed to rely on her sound judgment, should not have named the subject to Lady Dumbarton before going down to propose to her niece——” But she was interrupted by Lady Dumbarton herself, who, however deeply she valued, rarely spared her faithful Sparke.

“ Nonsense ! ” she said. “ Does anyone expect a young man to go asking advice about his love affairs from an old woman ? I couldn't have told him the only thing he wanted to know—whether Eveleen would have him or not.”

“Ah!” sighed Miss Sparke, submissively. “All’s well that ends well. At least,” she added more softly, “if it be well.”

“Why shouldn’t it be well?” inquired Lady Dumbarton, turning round sharply upon her unfortunate companion. It was all very good for her to run down her own relations, but a very different matter when Sparke ventured to take that liberty. “Do you mean to insinuate,” she continued loftily, “that Major Drew is not good enough for my niece, or my niece not good enough for Major Drew?”

“O, neither, my lady, neither,” returned Miss Sparke anxiously.

“Then I am to presume you meant nothing?” pursued her merciless ladyship. “That is not unfrequently the case with you, Sparke, so I have the less difficulty in believing you.”

“Your ladyship must excuse me,” replied Miss Sparke, goaded to desperation by this last insult. “I had a meaning. One which perhaps I had better have kept to myself, but which, nevertheless, I have every reason to

believe is shared by your ladyship. In every respect Miss Wilding is a most charming young lady, beautiful and accomplished and amiable. But, as to whether she will prove a spiritual helpmeet to her future husband—that is a point upon which perhaps your ladyship may agree with me.”

“Whether I agree or not,” remarked Lady Dumbarton, “is of little moment. I don’t discuss my relations with anybody.” Which was a most obvious and unadulterated falsehood; but served the purpose of closing the conversation.



CHAPTER V.

MISS SPARKE IS JEALOUS.

A FRESH incident now occurred to break the routine of Benedetta's daily life; and, for a time, in its pressing realities, to overshadow even the interest of Eveleen's engagement. This was nothing less than the serious illness of Lady Dumbarton, who, almost before she had time to write her somewhat coldly-worded letter of congratulation to her niece, was seized with another attack of rheumatic gout, far more painful and dangerous than the last. For some weeks she was confined to her bed, suffering greatly most of the time; and during these weeks, Benedetta devoted herself to her aunt, proving herself, notwithstanding her youth, a skilful as well as a tender nurse. Miss Sparke, who had not much of a constitution, was soon

knocked up ; but, when the doctor suggested a trained nurse, Benedetta pleaded so earnestly to take her place, and Lady Dumbarton herself shewed so decided a repugnance to the idea of strange ministrations, that it was arranged that Detta and the companion, with occasional assistance, should between them share the sick-room duties.

The attachment between Benedetta and her aunt ripened quickly in those days. Lady Dumbarton's religion was no sham. She was a hard, narrow-minded, uncharitable woman, but she judged others as she would have judged herself ; and, although possessing but little of the milk of human kindness, had through life striven to do her duty according to her own views. She was one of those people who complain much over a small annoyance ; but meet heavy trials with fortitude, one who would make the lives of others burdensome on account of a draught at the back of her neck, but who, in the agonies of rheumatic gout, would bear her pain without flinching. In fact, one of those persons not rarely to be met with, who think

that the worries of life come from man, and its greater troubles only from the Deity. Every day Detta became more and Miss Sparke less constant in the sick room. It was not only that Detta was stronger, and, notwithstanding her youth, more fitted for hard work; but she was also one of those people endowed with a natural aptitude for nursing. Her step was quiet without being stealthy, her shoes never creaked, and were devoid of heels to beat a tattoo on the floor; her movements were gentle, not jerky like Miss Sparke's, her voice soft and harmonious, and her manner free from the querulous air which so often invaded that of the companion. She had a good memory for remembering the doctor's instructions, and was thoughtful and prompt in carrying them out; but she never irritated the invalid by unnecessary opposition to her will or contradiction of her fancies. There was something soothing about the very sight of the girl's sweet, serious face, the sound of her calm voice, or the touch of her cool hand, as, with few words but with tender assiduity, she ministered to her aunt; and

when Miss Sparke, with her shrill accent, her quick movements and sharp manner, took her place beside the bed, the contrast was sufficiently unpleasing to Lady Dumbarton. She had never been accustomed to check the expression of her sentiments through fear of hurting the feelings of those around her, and was not likely to begin now in a time of ill-health.

Hence it came to pass that, on more than one occasion, Miss Sparke was unceremoniously banished from the room and desired to send Detta in her stead. "You put me into a fever, Sparke," Lady Dumbarton would say; "everything you have about you jingles. And I would much rather you would speak out loud than hiss in that dreadful whisper which goes through my head." Under these circumstances, it was perhaps not to be wondered at that Miss Sparke grew daily less well-disposed towards the visitor. It was not her fault that she jingled, that her movements were nervous, and her whisper like the war-cry of the goose; and it was hard that on account of these little failings, and after years of

patient service to a somewhat severe task-mistress, she should be ousted with so much contumely to make way for a little chit of a girl—one who, by reason of her soft brown eyes and caressing manner, was worming herself into her aunt's confidence, and undermining herself in that lady's favour. This was how Miss Sparke represented matters to herself, and she was not long in making Detta feel her ire. A life of dependence, and an accommodating, worldly-wise disposition had long ago taught Miss Sparke the necessity of self-control and the habit of bearing insult in silence, where such silence was a part of self-interest; but, on the present occasion, she felt no such obligation to restrain her feelings.

Benedetta Campbell was a young person of no importance or position; she lived, like herself, upon the bounty of others, having, report said, but a mere pittance of her own. At present she was in prosperity, being young, pretty and attractive, and favoured by circumstances, and the good nature of her relatives but she was in reality little better than herself in social position, and when she came to be

Miss Sparke's age (whatever that dubious figure might be) might very likely be holding some situation akin to her own and working for her daily bread. Lady Dumbarton was safe upstairs out of hearing, and Detta was not the girl, Miss Sparke felt instinctively—acting upon the instinct with characteristic lack of generosity—to detail grievances of the sort to her aunt.

She therefore permitted her spite to have full run, all the more freely since the Anglo-Italian girl, attributing her waspish manner first to a temporary fit of indigestion, and then to a temporary fit of ill-temper, for some time preferred to take no notice.

But the full storm burst one day when Benedetta, feeling she had swallowed with patience as much impertinence as even Christian charity required of her, turned towards the companion, and demanded, without preamble, to know why and wherefore was she so uncivil.

“Uncivil indeed!” snorted Miss Sparke. “That is a pretty word to use, is it not?”

“It is the right word,” replied Detta.

“Have I offended you in any way, Miss Sparke?”

“Offended me, indeed!” retorted the other.

“That would be quite impossible!”

“In that case, do you mean to keep it up?” enquired Detta impatiently. “I can only imagine you wish to drive me, by your rudeness, from the house; and that, I warn you, you will not do, so long as my aunt wants me.”

“I believe you,” replied Miss Sparke. “I am sure you have not the least intention of leaving this house in a hurry.”

“What can you mean?” asked the girl, turning an innocently amazed face towards her.

“Oh, *I* mean what I say!” exclaimed Miss Sparke, beside herself with anger and jealousy, and the delight of for once giving a loose rein to her feelings. “I am aware that this house is a comfortable one, and that a wealthy, childless old lady is not a bad friend to make. It is easy enough, no doubt, to cut out a plain, unattractive person, who has no foreign arts and

graces, and only knows how to do her duty unobtrusively."

For a moment the light in Detta's great dark eyes burst up like a flame, and Miss Sparke felt that she had bought her sweet revenge dangerously ; then it faded, and with cheeks a little paler than usual, but an accent of quiet scorn that the companion felt more cutting than any of the cold or sarcastic tones to which Lady Dumbarton had accustomed her, she answered her .

"Thank you," she said, "for replying to my question so clearly. So you thought, poor Miss Sparke, that I was coming here to turn you out of your place, and to sponge upon my 'wealthy, childless' aunt? But I have no wish to rob you of any of your privileges, now that you have stated them so plainly, nor have I any intention of taking up my abode here permanently."

And, before Miss Sparke could retort, Benedetta had gone from the room, leaving her companion in a terrified condition of doubt as to whether she would repeat any, and if so, how much, of the conversation to

the invalid. There was a marked difference in her manner when next they met—an extreme and half deprecating politeness—of which Benedetta, in her proud young scorn, took not the smallest notice. Miss Sparke, however, need not have feared; and, in point of fact, Lady Dumbarton never knew the useful light in which her companion regarded her as a wealthy, childless old lady; nor indeed was she ever made aware of any passage of arms having at this time occurred between the two.

And so the days passed on, and the weeks grew one into another; and, while the spring sunshone brighter and brighter, Benedetta kept her long watches in the close room upstairs. She began to grow pale and weary, for she was by nature active and a lover of the open air. And one day, the doctor who was attending Lady Dumbarton, and who had been struck by the girl's patient devotion, turned towards her suddenly. "You must go out more," he said peremptorily; "every day for an hour. We shall have you ill next."

As soon as he had left, Lady Dumbarton looked at her niece kindly. She was getting better now, though still unable to leave her bed.

“You must go out every day,” she said repeating the doctor’s words. “I have been selfish in keeping you in so long, Benedetta. I have forgotten you in my own illness. You do look white, child.”

“I have only grown white for want of the sun,” said Detta. “I am quite well. But I will walk out now that you are mending.”

“You have been very good to me, child,” said the elder woman, still looking thoughtfully at her. “You could not have nursed me more tenderly had you been my own child.” And Detta was surprised and touched to see the strong, hard-featured face working with suppressed emotion. She laid her little cool hand on that of the invalid, and stroked it gently. “It is nothing to thank me for, auntie,” she said simply. “I would have done it for anyone I was with; and it is a pleasure to do it for somebody one cares for.”

Lady Dumbarton did not reply for a moment. She began clasping and unclasping her long white fingers, and was struggling with the tears that filled her eyes. Few living people had seen tears in those keen grey eyes; but illness weakens us all, and Lady Dumbarton's self-control was not what it had been.

"Detta," she said suddenly, "did you ever hear of my little girl?"

"No," replied her niece. "I never even knew you had had a child."

"I had her seven years—and then she was taken from me," said the sick woman, in a low voice unlike her own. "It is more than thirty years ago now since she died. My little Lucia! Sometimes I think you remind me of her, Benedetta. You have the same dark, serious eyes. But, do not ask me questions of her. I never talk of it. I have not said as much as this about the past for years."

And Detta knew better than to ignore that request, or break in upon her companion's sad retrospect by any curious

words. But the sympathy that filled her eyes was full and deep; and those few sentences had, to the consciousness of both, greatly increased the previous bond of union between them



CHAPTER VI.

SERIOUS LOSSES.

EVELEEN'S letters were, during these days, an unfailing source of interest to her cousin. As spring ripened into early summer, the plans of the bride-elect began to be fully matured, and her wedding was fixed for an early date.

“You see,” wrote Eva, “Arthur is such a desperate old fidget. I believe he thinks, if he leaves me one minute, some one will come in through the window or the key-hole and snap me up; though really, as I tell him, considering the six years when I managed to take care of myself and my affairs during his absence, I need not be considered such a very perishable commodity. But then, on the other hand, as we are both such old fogies—quite in the sere and withered leaf—it would

be unbecoming to ape the coyness of sweet seventeen. So I told him I made no objection to anything not under a three months' engagement. That is the limit I consider due to my own self-respect. But there—give a man an inch and he takes an ell! I had no sooner pronounced my fiat than I found he had persuaded mama into fixing a day quite a week under the three months, and when I reproached him on the score of the word of honour of a gentleman and a soldier, he entrenches himself behind the jesuitical defence that the time fixed was three full lunar months off!"

Beresford Conway's name too was not without constant and honourable mention in Eva's correspondence. Her cousin's kindness and congratulations had known no bounds, and Arthur appeared to be as fond of him as she was. Very often Eva in her remarks coupled his name with her own. "Beresford and I think you must find it very dull at Steynton," or, "Beresford and I want to know when you are coming back to this part of the world?" Now that her aunt was getting better, and

that her duties in the sick-room became less onerous, Detta had a good deal of time for private reflection, and as Eveleen's letters were almost the only break in the calm monotony of her life, she naturally dwelt more upon them and their contents than she would otherwise have done. She fancied that Eva and her prospects only was the subject which filled her mind; but it must be confessed that Mr. Conway also came in for a share of her meditations. There must be a great deal of good in him, she told herself, for a man like Major Drew to entertain for him so sincere a friendship. Yet she knew that before. Major Drew's regard was not necessary to inform her of the fact that Beresford Conway had stronger stuff in him than appeared upon the surface. She had seen proofs of his generosity, his kindliness, and the general hatred of humbug and insincerity which pervaded his character. What a pity he should encourage in himself the outward simulation of a shallow and affected man of fashion. Well, after all, it mattered little to her what was his outward simulation. Yet

sometimes—notwithstanding her contentment at Steynton, notwithstanding the ripening affection between herself and her aunt, and the unfailing enjoyment of the daily walks with Yarrow—a feeling would cross her mind that, after all, it was a little lonely here, and that they must be a very sociable party at Ashley Manor. Eveleen described the home circle as having already almost realised her prognostication of the Happy Family, only with the addition of her cousin Beresford, who seemed, on one excuse or another, to be always running down from town for a visit of a few days or a few hours to his cousins.

“Mama is growing so absurdly devoted to Arthur,” wrote Eva, “and he to her, that I shall begin to be jealous soon. They are constantly caballing together behind my back, and settling matters without asking my opinion; and if I want any little favour from mama now, I have to send Arthur as my ambassador, and it gets done on the spot. If this goes on much further, I have told Arthur that I shall get up a rival flirtation with Beresford.”

Then one day came a remark of a different nature.

“Beresford says he shan’t come down here any more now until I am married,” wrote Eva. “Can you guess why? He says it is really too trying to see two people always making love to each other, and to feel himself left out in the cold! Poor old boy! I should never have given him credit for so much sentiment, should you, my sapient Detta? I have been asking him, if that is the case, why on earth he does not get engaged himself—though, as I told him, if he ever proposed to any girl who did not meet with my approval, there *would* be a jolly row! He said he would think the matter over. But I couldn’t get much satisfaction out of him. And indeed, I *hardly* know anybody good enough for him.”

The word “hardly” had been strongly underlined; Detta could not help wondering with how much purpose. Also, how far her sharp-witted cousin suspected the true state of affairs. But, very possibly, even now the complexion of those affairs was changing.

Mr. Conway was not a man who, if he once made up his mind to become a Benedict, need have long to wait or far to seek in the choice of a willing and suitable bride.

Mixing constantly, as he did, in the best and most agreeable society, the number of eligible young ladies to whom it was open to him, with every prospect of success, to pay his addresses, must be large indeed. Under such circumstances, it was not very likely that he would long trouble himself with the remembrance of an unimportant little relative of his cousin's—a girl without position, birth, or special talents—whose half-foreign ways and appearance had for a moment taken his fancy. So much the better, said Detta to herself, somewhat proudly and yet sadly, as she stroked Yarrow's head, and looked out upon the blue and purple lines that streaked the windy sea. It was nothing to her; she had refused him because she did not love him. A man of the world, a kindly but narrow-minded Englishman, who could feel himself thoroughly at home nowhere save on the well-polished pavements of Bond Street or Piccadilly—he was

not the man to suit a half-Bohemian nature like her own—a nature which had been well drilled into English ways and accomplishments and the English power of self-control, but which still at times acknowledged a vague, reprehensible yearning towards the old untrammelled life of her childhood. She could never, she thought, be content to lead the town or country life of a fine lady, with liveried servants always at her elbow, a carriage invariably at hand to rob her of every free wandering, and an incessant round, day and night, of a monotonously-moulded society. The very thought of such things made her shudder. She was evidently intended for some far less lofty and highly-polished existence, for a life of freedom, of work, of many interests—to be the wife perhaps of some poor and striving man, the vicissitudes of whose lot she could share with enthusiasm, whose efforts she could cheer and encourage, and whose ambition she could foster. And then, it flashed across her mind that such an one was Ino Bartolucci—just such a career would be that of his wife.

Why had she felt from the first—notwithstanding her affection for him—how utterly impossible it was that she should ever take up such a position beside him? She must be hard-hearted, hard to please.

And with Eva's letter lying in her lap, Detta sat in her favourite spot on the little sandy eminence, letting her thoughts dwell for a few moments with mournful dissatisfaction upon her own 'contrary' disposition. It was quite true what Miss Sparke had implied; she was absolutely without any home save that offered to her through the kindness of her relations.

Eveleen was going to be married; Mrs. Wilding, notwithstanding her daughter's comfortable arrangements for a *tête-à-tête* house-keeping between Detta and herself, would probably take up her abode with them after their marriage. At Steynton Court, indeed, she knew that she was more than welcome—that she was of real use and comfort to its mistress, and that a home would always be open to her. But, even supposing that she could sufficiently conquer her pride to accept for good the bread of charity, it must pro-

bably be at the cost of either an unceasing warfare with Miss Sparke, or of the expulsion of that lady from the Court—a proceeding which the girl felt, with perhaps over-scrupulosity, would be a somewhat cruel requital of the companion's eleven years of faithful service. Little too as she might acknowledge it to herself, and much as she loved the country, the prospect of remaining year after year without change and without movement—for Lady Dumbarton was no lover of travelling—in this same lonely spot on the bleak northern coast, with the unbroken companionship of an elderly invalid, stern and silent, joined perhaps to that of a narrow-minded unamiably-disposed old maid, gave her a not unnatural chill of prospective loneliness.

From these reflections she had to arouse herself with an effort; and, crushing the letter into her pocket, to start off with the willing Yarrow for some distant scramble, where the invigorating sight of great over-hanging cliffs, and the tonic of the rushing waves, soon swept away all melancholy cobwebs from her brain.

Eveleen's marriage was now at hand. June had already opened, and, in little more than a week, Detta was to proceed southwards for the important event. Her bridesmaid's dress had long ago been ordered by Mrs. Wilding, and her modest wedding gift was to accompany her.

Lady Dumbarton, although almost more than convalescent, had decided that her strength was not equal to the journey; a resolution which it is to be feared was hailed with undisguised satisfaction by her unappreciative relatives at the Manor.

As the day approached, it was but natural that Detta's mind should be somewhat preoccupied with the visit before her. She was to remain only a fortnight, arriving a week before the wedding and stopping on a week after it, in order to act as consoler, or, as Eva unfeelingly called it, bottle-holder for Mrs. Wilding's maternal tears—Lady Dumbarton declaring, with unusual partiality, that she was at present quite unable to spare the girl for a longer period. Perhaps it was the exceeding quiet and monotony of her daily life at

Steynton that made Detta look forward with such unusual interest to the change before her; or possibly it was, as she told herself, on account of the strong affection she bore her cousin, and the consequent interest which she took in all that concerned her happiness. Be that it as may, she acknowledged inwardly to a quite unwonted eagerness about the matter. The realization, however, of the incidents she had pictured to herself—of Eveleen in her bridal dress standing beside her promised husband—of her cousin's last good-bye—and of many another little domestic scene—the same that are played with little variety in the serio-comedy of every happy marriage more or less—was never to be hers. The drama would come off, the little act would be played, and the bonds of wedlock would unite Eveleen Wilding to her faithful and devoted lover; but Detta was to be no witness of the fact. Just at this time, only a fortnight before the day fixed for the wedding, a heavy and unexpected blow fell upon Mrs. Wilding and her daughter.

Benedetta on reading the letter which contained the news could not repress a cry of dismay and astonishment; and even Lady Dumbarton's face grew serious as her niece read aloud to her the two closely written sheets. And yet, considering the circumstances, Eveleen's letter was far from being a melancholy or desponding one.

“My dearest Detta,” she wrote, “I really don't know how to tell you what has happened to us all. I had better put the bald fact before you briefly and at once—we are ruined! (N.B.—I don't mean you; I am thankful to say your little scrap of money is in other hands, and so all right, and hasn't shared the fate of ours). But mama's is all gone; that is to say all except a little paltry two hundred or so a year, which, fortunately for her, was safely locked up in those dear old uninteresting Three per Cents. Absolutely all the rest has been swindled away by that wretched man Becket, who has been mama's man of business for the last few years, and who, it seems, has been speculating right and left

with all his clients' moneys, and is a regular thief! The most aggravating part of the affair is that he has got off safe to America or somewhere. As soon as he found that there was going to be a crash, and that he couldn't hide his evil deeds any longer, he bolted, carrying with him from the bank what cash he could still lay hands upon. Everybody, bankers and all, are paralysed with astonishment and horror, for no one suspected him to be capable of such a thing. He has always borne a very good character, and must have been an arch hypocrite. Of course they have got a warrant out against him, and are doing all they can to catch him; but it doesn't matter much to us whether they do or not, as they say he is all but bankrupt, and so we shall never get a farthing of our poor possessions back again. But I haven't told you what is really the worst part of the whole business. He had the entire management of Beresford Conway's affairs, and he has mulcted him of nearly every penny he possesses. You know how Beresford hates

business matters. He had simply placed everything unreservedly in this man's hands, having every confidence in him; and, with the exception of the London property, which I believe is too poor to be worth much, there is not a thing of any sort or kind which has not been gamed away from him. I don't know what the poor fellow will do, for he has been accustomed all his life long to live in luxury and extravagance, and it is so much harder for a man than a woman to pull up and economize. The only prospect I can see for him is to go in at once for an heiress; but I am afraid he is too proud and obstinate to do that. Of course his father, Lord Courthope, will do something for him, but I am afraid not much, as he is a very stingy man; and also Beresford has more than half quarrelled with him since his second foolish marriage. But Beresford does not seem to think a bit about himself or his own affairs at present. He is quite overcome by our loss, and takes the whole blame to himself, just because Mr. Becket was his man of business and he recom-

mended him to mama. His one idea seems to be how to get a restitution of any of her losses. He is here now, and he and Arthur are doing their best to console poor mother, who is nearly out of her mind. As for me, I am afraid I'm very heartless; but the fact of the matter is I do not feel nearly as heart-broken about it as I suppose I ought to do. It does seem to me, when once I am married to Arthur, of comparatively very little importance whether I have to keep house on six or nine hundred a year, whether I can afford to give dinner-parties or not, and whether I walk or drive in my carriage to return my neighbour's calls. It is quite worth while to me to have lost the money, only to prove what a double-dyed old brick Arthur can come out. He literally doesn't care one straw whether I've a thousand pounds a year or a thousand farthings; in fact, he says, as far as it concerns himself, he would rather prefer me with the thousand farthings, as a wife with money is always a responsibility, and he considers that he has enough to keep us both decently. The

only thing that aggravates him—and no wonder, poor fellow! is that mama insists that the wedding must be put off; and she is in so distracted a condition that nobody dare argue with her; though, as Arthur very truly says, the fact of her having lost her income makes a speedy marriage all the more sensible. However, he has had to give in; but only for a fortnight's delay. He will not consent to a day longer; and even this concession has made him more nearly cross than I ever saw my lord-elect before. I have got them all on my hands to-day—Beresford low in his self-reproachings, mama in alternate fits of tears and irritability, and Arthur grumbling over the uselessness of the deferred day. I feel like the old woman that lived in a shoe; and I know they one and all look upon me as an unfeeling brute with no heart and less sympathy. But I am really dreadfully sorry for poor mama, as I know you will be, Detta dear. It must be awfully hard at her age to be suddenly swindled out of four fifths of your income. All the same, I hope the time will come,

in a few years, when she will feel that it has made little real difference to her happiness; perhaps, indeed, given her more of real happiness, since now I think she will be obliged to come and live with her children. I am afraid it may make a difference to you in some ways, dear Detta; but one's head feels too confused at present to grasp all the details and consequences of the whole affair. I will write again as soon as I can, for I know how anxious you will be to hear everything. Remember, however, that I expect you for my wedding day—probably the fifth of July. The wedding will be quieter than we had intended, but you must be there, whatever happens—you and Beresford—my two dear old cousins.” Then, quite as an after-thought, came the postscript: “I hope Aunt Dumbarton is better? Tell her mama is really too upset to write to her or to anyone at present, but no doubt will do so in a few days.

N.B. How can you manage to get on with the old Griffin in the comfortable way you seem to do?”

It was exceedingly unkind and thoughtless of Eveleen, her cousin felt, to add this unflattering postscript to her letter. Without it, Detta could at once have passed the sheet over entire to her aunt, a proceeding which would have given her satisfaction, as being an opportunity of convincing Lady Dumbarton of that sweet and kindly disposition, so free from taint of worldliness, which had often been a subject of dispute between the two. Nevertheless, the elder woman did not contradict her, when, with glowing eyes, Benedetta raised her face from the perusal aloud of her letter. "Oh, aunt!" she exclaimed, "will you not say now that Eva is one who cares nothing for money or position in comparison with the affection of those she loves?"

"I will admit, my dear," said Lady Dumbarton, "that your cousin is in love. Well, Arthur Drew will have a penniless wife; but, I suppose, after waiting for her six years, that seems a trifle. Poor Fanny!" she added with genuine pity, not unflavoured by a little touch of sarcasm, "*she* has no romance to

carry her over her loss. At her age it is always a trial to have a reduced income; and to such a complete woman of the world as my sister, it is, I fear, a trial without mitigations.

As for that fine gentleman," she continued, referring doubtless to Mr. Conway, "it will be a new sensation for him not to know where to turn for a sixpence, and possibly a not unsalutary lesson for a young man who appears to think the world and all that it contains made for his sole use and benefit. If he had to work for his living it would do him a great deal of good, morally and physically. But he will probably live instead upon his relations, and suffer little from the culpable carelessness which has ruined his cousins."

Unjust as Detta felt this speech to be, something nevertheless seemed to seal her lips from taking up the defence of the absent; and Lady Dumbarton's strictures passed unchallenged.

As was natural, however, the subject of Mrs. Wilding's losses formed the staple topic of conversation between the two for the next

few days, and was rarely for many minutes at a time out of Detta's mind. Eveleen was right in saying she herself was not much to be pitied. What was a trifling loss of fortune to a girl in her situation, about to be married to a man whose means, though slender, were yet sufficient—a man who adored her and to whom she was herself devoted heart and soul? To her the event might well seem one of minor importance, affecting her mother far more than herself.

She was in that happy condition of mind which comes perhaps once in the lives of the most unromantic or even sordid—a condition when heaven and earth, prosperity and adversity, joy and misery, are all centred in one human being, whose very existence is sufficient to ward off outside care, and whose affection is absolutely the one thing needful to ensure a continued supply of undimmed sunshine.

But it was very different with the others. Proud and worldly Mrs. Wilding certainly was, Detta could not gainsay the fact, notwithstanding the affectionate kindness that had been shown herself by her aunt. The blow

would be a cruel one to her. And how about Mr. Conway? Would he, as Lady Dumbarton had prophesied, hang about, subsisting on the charity of friends or relatives, frequenting the same places where he had been accustomed to take the position of a man of wealth and importance? Or would his father possibly find him some sinecure post, which would provide him with the wherewithal to carry on his accustomed existence in fashionable society? Considering how short a time she had known him, it seemed strange how assured she felt that this was not the style of life to suit Mr. Conway under present circumstances; and the equal assurance with which she dismissed from her mind the possibility of his following his cousin's proffered advice to look up an heiress at once.

The incident must, Detta felt, affect her own future. It appeared to her now clear that there was no possibility of her again taking up her permanent abode with her Aunt Wilding; and more and more the idea forced itself upon her that it would be better, more reasonable, more right, that she should, after

a time, leave the shelter of the roof under which she now lived, and go forth to seek her own living. Something in the girl's nature revolted against being a dependent even in the houses of near relations.

"I will go to the Maestro," she thought, "that is surely my real home. It may be that I should get occupation in Rome ; and at any rate I could be useful in keeping house for him and nursing him now that he is so feeble. I will write and ask him. I know that he will tell me the truth."

Day by day, as she wandered over the breezy common, or sat with Yarrow on the belt of shingle watching the little blue summer waves leap along the golden sands, these thoughts pressed upon her more strongly, until they grew into a determination which she resolved should be broken to Lady Dumbarton on her return from her cousin's wedding.

She would not speak of it as yet—Lady Dumbarton was still somewhat of an invalid—her presence was still, she knew, a comfort, and the proposition might be one not only to

annoy but to anger her. Probably also, other but half-acknowledged feelings combined to strengthen Detta's decision to take no irremediable steps as to the arrangement of her own future before she had once more seen and consulted with her relatives at Ashley Manor.



CHAPTER VII.

DETTA IN DISGRACE.

ONE morning—the very morning before the day on which Detta was to start for her cousin's wedding—a foreign letter was placed before her breakfast-plate. Lady Dumbarton was not yet down, but Miss Sparke's lynx-like eyes devoured the thin blue paper and delicate handwriting with a greedy suspicion. The address was certainly peculiar to English eyes unused to foreign terms, such as were Miss Sparke's; for it was worded: “A la stimatissima Miss Campbell, Ashley Manor,” from whence it had been forwarded to its present destination. Benedetta tore the letter open with an eagerness which did not escape her companion's observation. It was a long time, it seemed to her, since she had heard from Ino. Once indeed, only, had the young

man written since his return to Italy; and then the epistle had been somewhat brief and unsatisfactory, merely giving an account of the Maestro's well-being, and forwarding to her his kindly messages, but abounding in none of those friendly touches or descriptive flights which in former days had been so characteristic a part of Ino's correspondence. This one too was short, and seemed hurriedly written; and Miss Sparke noticed that as the girl read it, she caught her breath with a half-uttered exclamation of grief, and that her eyes filled with tears.

"I am afraid," said the companion, prompted it is to be feared more by curiosity than sympathy, "that you have some bad news this morning, Miss Campbell?"

"Yes," replied Detta; "the Maestro, my old friend at Rome, is very ill."

She seemed anxious to avoid Miss Sparke's flood of inquiries, and made her escape as soon as possible from a half-eaten breakfast, hurrying upstairs to her aunt's room. Lady Dumbarton was sitting up in bed, her breakfast before her, and, notwithstanding Bene-

detta's effort to control her emotion, at once perceived that something was wrong.

"What is it?" she exclaimed. "Any new misfortune happened to Fanny or her daughter?"

"No, aunt," said Detta, seating herself beside her quietly as usual; "but I want to talk to you. The Maestro is very ill. He is dying." And as she spoke her self-command gave way, and the tears fell quickly down her cheeks.

"Oh, is that all?" asked her aunt, sinking back again upon her cushion. "Only one of those Italian people. Your face quite frightened me, Detta; I thought there was something really wrong."

The great dark eyes flashed with sudden anger, and the tears stopped in their course, as Detta half rose up with a passionate gesture.

"Only the Maestro!" she exclaimed in a voice, which though not loud, vibrated with emotion; "who could there be more than the Maestro? why do you all speak of him as if he could be nothing to me?"

"I do not question your affection for him," replied the other coldly. "I have no doubt

you value him far more than your father's relations, notwithstanding all they have done for you in the past six years."

"And why should I not love him better than anyone else?" said Detta, stung by the sarcastic tone.

"Why not?" repeated Lady Dumbarton. "Probably gratitude is not a distinguishing trait in your character."

Detta's face flushed deeply, and for a moment she was silent.

"I am grateful, very grateful," she said at length in a low, pained voice. "You have been very, very good to me—both you and Aunt Fanny, and I love you both—and most of all for the reason why you have been so good to me. I know what that was. It is because you loved my poor dead father, and so were determined to be kind and generous to his child. But the Maestro was my father's dearest friend; it was he who nursed him—he died in his arms. And when my father died he gave me into his charge—oh! surely you know it all—and he, the Signor Cortauld, brought me up and cared for me as if I had

been his own daughter. And all for love of my father, your brother. Surely you, who thought so much of my father, must also care a little for this man who did everything for him? And should I not be bad, and ungrateful, and unworthy if I could forget him, just because I was in another country and had found other kind friends?"

Detta's short-lived anger had completely departed. But the pleading, tear-filled eyes with which she now gazed up into Lady Dumbarton's face had little power to move her aunt. Lady Dumbarton was one of those persons on whom the display of emotional distress (or what she would have termed a scene) had, constitutionally, a hardening rather than a softening effect. It was not that she was by any means devoid of feeling, although perhaps not over dowered in this respect; but, being herself of a self-contained and reticent nature, the sight of openly expressed emotion in others was repugnant to her, as seeming but half real and wholly unnecessary. She now drew her hand a little away, out of the reach of Detta's caressing

touch, and removed her gaze from the girl's eyes.

"No one that I am aware of," she remarked, "has any objection to your feeling gratitude, or, if you like, affection, towards this Mr. Cortauld. If I object to anything, it is only what seems to me an overdrawn exhibition of feeling on account of a person whom you have not seen since you were a mere child, and who is not connected with you by any blood relationship."

Detta gave one more appealing glance in her direction, then silenced the retort which rose to her lips, asking merely—

"Shall I read you his letter, aunt?"

"He can't be so very ill if he writes to you himself," remarked Lady Dumbarton.

"It is not from him, aunt—he cannot see or move—it is from Ino Bartolucci—the one who was in London a few weeks ago."

"O, the young sculptor! What has he got to do with it? And, pray why must you speak of him so familiarly by that ridiculous name?"

"He has never been anything but Ino to

me," replied the girl, meekly. "We were children together. You forget, aunt; my mother was of the middle class herself."

"I am not likely to forget it," said Lady Dumbarton, with acidity; "though I am not as proud of the fact as you appear to be."

"And now," continued Detta, without replying to this taunt, "he is with the Maestro, nursing him until I come. But he cannot stop long; he must return to Florence."

"Until you go to him?" re-echoed her aunt, ignoring the later part of her sentence. "Is the girl out of her mind—and the young man, too? How on earth do you expect to go to him? It is absolutely impossible."

"Aunt," said Detta, quietly, "I must go; he wishes for me."

"It is impossible," repeated Lady Dumbarton, with anger; "absolutely impossible. You must be quite mad to dream of such a thing. How can you go rushing over the continent by yourself? And who is to go with you? I am quite sure that neither your Aunt Fanny nor myself will provide

you with funds for such an absurd and unreasonable project."

"I can take care of myself," said the girl, proudly. "And as for funds," she added, her face flushing, "I will not beg from anybody. I have enough of my own to pay for my journey."

"It would take the whole of your half-year's allowance," said her aunt; "for I'm sure I will not help you. You are an idiot, Detta. Life is not made up of sentiment."

"But," said Detta, her eyes again filling, "the best part of it is made up of love."

Then, as Lady Dumbarton replied merely by an unsympathetic snort, she opened her letter, translating it into English as she went on—

"The beloved Maestro is very ill. I write at once to tell you; for he is dying, I fear, and it may be that he has not many weeks or even days to live. Two days ago he had a heavy stroke of paralysis, and he is so feeble that the doctor hardly thinks his life can be long spared. I came from

Florence when I heard of it; but alas! I cannot stay long. I should lose my commission were I not to return in the course of a few days; and yet I cannot bear to leave him, my old friend and your once father, to the care of strangers and servants. He is still conscious—can even speak a little, and suffers, I hope, but little pain. He spoke to me this morning of you. ‘Give her my love,’ he said, ‘my Piccola; tell her, if I die, that I have never forgotten her nor ceased to love her, and that I pray God that her life and character may be worthy of the noble father who was so dear to me.’ ‘Shall I not write and ask her to come to you? I said; ‘she loves you very much—she would be glad.’ And a smile, like that on one of the faces of Rafaele’s angels, came over his face. ‘Ah, Dio!’ he said, ‘it would be sweet to hear her young voice again. But better not to ask. Her English relations have been good to her. They would not, perhaps, approve, and she must not quarrel with them.’ Nevertheless, dear signorina, I have written to let you know what he said.

It is right that you yourself should decide ; for I know how your tender heart will yearn to bring one last comfort to the old man who watched over your childhood, and who tended your father on his death-bed."

Several times during the reading of Ino's touching words Detta's voice had nearly broken down ; but she struggled on with her task, feeling that, if anything would move Lady Dumbarton's sternly-rooted opinions, it would be the hearing of this simply, tenderly expressed letter. There was a silence of several moments after she had finished ; but on glancing upwards, Benedetta saw that her aunt's countenance retained its former hard expression.

"It is a well-meant letter, no doubt," she remarked at length ; "though certainly the young man is going out of his province in attempting to influence your course of action—a proceeding which should be left to the relations and natural advisers of a young girl. It is, no doubt, sad that you should be unable to see this old man again, if he wishes

it; but that is absolutely precluded by the distance between you, and he knows it; and, as you see, he expressly desires you to be guided by the opinions of your friends on the matter. You are not the first person, Detta, who has lost a friend at a distance. When you are a little older, you will understand that circumstances will not always permit us to fly hither and thither, as our feelings would dictate, to bid farewell to every dying friend in a foreign country."

Benedetta was silent for a moment; then she looked her aunt firmly in the face.

"Aunt," she said, "I have made up my mind that I must go. I am sorry, very sorry to make you angry; but I am sure it is right. And, even if I were not sure," she added in a lower voice, "I must have gone."

"You mean to go?" asked Lady Dumbar-ton, raising herself upright again, and gazing at her niece with a sort of hard glitter in her eyes that answered for what in more demonstrative people would have been a violent outbreak of passion. "Against my express com-

mands? And how do you intend to go? And when?"

"I shall go by myself, of course," replied Detta. "And I think I had better go to-morrow."

"I forbid you to go!" said the elder woman. "No niece of mine shall depart in such disreputable fashion on such an errand. You will have to choose between your Roman friends and me. If you go on that journey, unattended, to lodge by yourself no one knows where, in that Papist city, you do it knowing the cost. I wash my hands of you. You can take your choice. You had better leave me now."

And ringing the bell at her bed-head for the maid, Lady Dumbarton deliberately turned her face to the wall and her back upon her niece.

It was a matter of astonishment to Detta in after days that she had the courage to carry through her resolution in spite of all opposition and difficulty. It was a dreary day. Her aunt utterly refused to speak to her or take any notice of her; and Miss Sparke,

following the lead of her employer, maintained towards the delinquent an air of cold and silent indignation ; whilst obstacles not a few rose up in the girl's own mind to prompt her to relinquish her project, or at any rate to defer it. It was a grievous disappointment to her not to be present at her cousin's wedding ; and to give up the visit to which she had looked forward so much, above all, to lose the advice and assistance which she had expected both from Eva and her mother on the subject of her own proposed plans.

Now, it might be months before she again saw them—years perhaps—who could tell ? Once settled at Rome, was it not possible that her relatives—one of whom she had deeply angered, and the other of whom was now restricted, by the limits of an exceedingly scant income—might forget their former love for her, or at any rate fail to ask her at any time to return to them ?

Benedetta had fancied that her affection for her mother's country was a deeply rooted and prevailing sentiment ; and so in one sense it

was. The very name of Italy, the liquid sound of the soft Italian tongue, had power to arouse a sort of yearning in her breast. Nevertheless, she felt that to return to Rome now, unaccompanied, and in defiance of the wishes it might be of all her English friends—was to exchange a present certainty of home-life and home love for a very doubtful equivalent.

Rome, with all the romance of its surroundings, with all the charm of its reminiscences, would be at any rate at first a land of strangers, affording but a chill welcome after her long and solitary journey.

It was nearly seven years since Detta, in company with Rafaelino Bartolucci, had left the Eternal City and started for English shores—and seven years is a long time in the life of a growing girl. She was then a child; she was now a woman. Her former acquaintances, of whom she had but a hazy remembrance, would many of them be dead or passed away; and others, in point of position and education, be totally uncongenial companions.

Annunciata was dead, Pippo had left ; there would not be one single soul whom she remembered and cared for—not one single soul to connect her with the old days—save the Maestro and Ino. And Ino, if not already gone, would be leaving almost immediately after her arrival. And then Detta thought of the cheerful rooms at Ashley Manor, of her aunt's maternal ways, of Eveleen's affection and *espièglerie*, of Major Drew's kind and cordial face, and Beresford Conway's agreeable presence ; and, as in contrast to the scene, there rose up before her a vision of the large, cheerless room on the fourth piano of the Palazzo Carboneelli, inhabited by one solitary old man, dying, perhaps speechless—not a friendly face or voice near to assist or advise—her heart for a moment nearly failed her.

But only for one moment. The next she was reproaching herself with bitter scorn for the selfishness which could harbour such thoughts—such fears.

What had the future to do with it ? Whatever the future might bring forth was nothing to her ; her duty in the present lay

before her clearly enough. And was not the duty also a pleasure? Had she no heart to take pleasure in soothing the dying moments, and fulfilling the last dying wish of the Maestro, whom she had always told herself she loved so dearly?

Yet it was a trying day to her; and would have been still more trying had it not been for the natural excitement inseparable at her age from the prospect of so long and novel a journey. She had plenty to do. Yarrow and Rollo must be bid farewell, a long letter must be written to her cousin Eva to arrive the next morning instead of herself at the Manor, detailing every circumstance which had induced her to follow her present line of action, much packing up, and before dinner, one last run, tired as she was, to the favourite knoll where she and her canine friend had so often sat together, to bid adieu to the blue streak of distant sea—that northern sea upon which she might never rest her eyes again. How often it had rolled in, grey and turbulent, beneath her feet, as she stood that spring upon the rocky cliff walls that bounded its tide; but

how clear and unbroken lay the reflections now upon its glassy surface, as the white and red sails of the far-off fishing boats sparkled here and there like daylight stars ——

Before retiring to her room for the night, Detta made one more effort at reconciliation with her aunt. Lady Dumbarton was about to leave the room without a word to her niece when the girl stopped her half timidly.

“May I come and say good-bye to you in the morning, aunt, before I go?” she asked.

“I have no wish to see you again,” replied the other, “unless you come to tell me that you have repented of your folly, and mean to obey those under whose care you are placed.”

“Oh, aunt, do not be so angry—so hard with me! I would obey you if I could—if it was anything else you asked me. But I must do this.”

“There is no must,” said Lady Dumbarton. “On the contrary, your wilfulness is astounding. You, a girl not yet nineteen, are flying in the face of your natural protectors—those whom Providence has placed over you. It is

preposterous conduct. What the end of it all will be no one can tell. Do not blame me, if, as you make your bed, so you have to lie upon it. I cannot say it would astonish me to hear anything, however disreputable, of a girl who persisted in taking such a step. Were I legally your guardian you should be restrained by force. As it is, I have no legal power over you, and moral power you defy. As things have turned out, it is perhaps as well for me that you are not my ward. I am deeply disappointed in you, Detta."

So saying, Lady Dumbarton sailed from the room, whilst Detta dropped her head upon her hands and burst into tears. She was by no means a strong-minded, self-opiniated young woman, able to receive such harsh words with impunity ; she was, on the contrary, sensitive to the judgment of others and easily wounded by those she loved ; and she felt cut to the quick by a tone of such bitter severity coming from one between whom and herself so sincere a regard had of late existed.

She started and raised her head quickly, however, as the voice of Miss Sparke made

itself heard beside her. Miss Sparke's manner was reserved and her eye cold. There was a stand-alooft, *noli mi tangere* sort of air about her, as, in measured tones and with exaggerated dignity, entirely differing from her usual half-nervous, half-querulous style of utterance, she delivered her message.

“My lady begs me to tell you, Miss Campbell, that the carriage will be ready to take you to the station at any hour you may please to order it to-morrow morning. Much as she is displeased at your line of conduct, she does not wish, for the credit of the family, to disgrace her niece in the eyes of the servants. She therefore begs you to entrust your orders to me and I will see that they are properly carried out; and will myself escort you to your train.”

Probably this was the first interview between Detta and Miss Sparke, since the arrival of the former at Steynton Court, that had been a source of satisfaction to the lady companion. But so unmistakably was this sentiment now displayed in her manner, that the girl found it impossible not to refuse,

with a proud peremptoriness, her proffered company.

“I am much obliged to Aunt Dumbarton,” she said; “but I will not trouble you to come with me, Miss Sparke. I do not think it would be any pleasure to either of us.”

“It does not surprise me,” snorted Miss Sparke, “that a young lady whose movements are so eccentric and so unhampered by the conventional proprieties of life should prefer to go about by herself. It is, on the contrary, just what I should have expected.”



CHAPTER VIII.

FRIENDLY WORDS.

LADY DUMBARTON passed but a restless night; and, although she sent no further message, nor showed any intention of a reconciliation with her niece, yet was she fully alive to every sound of early departure echoing down the long passages the next morning—to the opening and shutting of the front door, and to the noise of carriage wheels, as they rolled down the drive. A moment later, her maid brought her a note, which she allowed to lie carelessly enough upon the bed, until the girl had left the room, and then tore open with a strange wistfulness at her heart—a wistfulness which she would not willingly have acknowledged even to herself. It was from Detta, short and

simple enough. She had felt it impossible to leave her aunt without one last word.

“Dear aunt, I am very, very sorry to have made you so angry with me; and O, so sorry that you will not say good-bye. Perhaps, some day you will be able to forgive me for disobeying you. But I feel that I must do it, and that it is my duty. I should be wicked and beneath scorn, if I were to leave the Maestro to die alone. He was my only friend as a child—he wants me——

“Perhaps you will never care to see me again, and perhaps things may turn out so that I shall never return to England; but I shall always be grateful to you, and love you for your kindness to me. What makes me more sad than anything else, is to know that you think me unfeeling. I can do nothing, I am afraid, to alter that; but I can promise you, that, please God, wherever I live, I will never do anything to disgrace my family, or to degrade myself. DETTA.”

For many a mile after Detta had started on

her long journey, her note remained in Lady Dumbarton's fingers; and the stern face softened, as, all alone, the old woman re-read the simple words. But, when at length she made her appearance downstairs, her features had again assumed their usual fixed expression; and no one would have guessed how greatly she missed the sound of the bright, young voice, and the light, quick step, nor how, even now, her heart was dwelling with a vague yearning, on the sweet oval face, with its grave, truthful glance—the face of the girl who reminded her of her own lost child, and whom she had permitted to leave her house without farewell word or kiss—nay, whom she had driven from her with a threat of future estrangement.

The only indication of her feelings was in the manner with which she received Miss Sparke's attempt at discussion of the subject. There was a scornful acerbity in her tone, as she promptly put a stop to her companion's remarks, which convinced the latter lady that the topic was a dangerous one, for the future to be avoided.

Meanwhile, Detta, seated in the down express, was whizzing through the northern counties with a failing heart. Now that she had really started, she began to realise the loneliness of her position, and the long, dreary journey that lay before her.

The fact that Lady Dumbarton had not said good-bye to her, especially weighed on her mind; and, notwithstanding her conviction that she was doing the right thing, she could not free herself from feelings of self-dissatisfaction, and a sense of ingratitude upon this point. She began to wonder, sadly, whether it were not possible that her relatives at Ashley might agree with Lady Dumbarton. Would Aunt Fanny, too, consider her conduct wilful, unreasonable and improper? Perhaps even Eveleen might share her mother's sentiments, and all her English relations be turned against her by this one rash act of hers! Detta must, indeed, have been greatly depressed before such a fancy as this could have taken hold of her mind. Presently, as the train sped on, stopping at station after station, and her two or three

travelling companions got out, leaving her alone in the carriage, the girl's emotion became too much for her, and the tears that had so long been rising from her heart, welled over, and followed each other rapidly down her cheeks. In fact, poor Detta had, what her sex appropriately call, "a good cry," only rousing herself hurriedly to dry her eyes as the train began again to slacken speed. Her heart was heavy as she looked out of the window. They were now approaching Naseborough Junction—the junction at which she had always been accustomed to change when returning to Ashley.

Very often Eveleen's bright face had greeted her here; or, if not Eveleen's, the broad friendly countenance of Aunt Fanny's well-dressed housekeeper, or the immovably respectful one of her elderly male factotum—that important person who combined in himself the duties of butler, confidential friend and agent. For it was one of Mrs. Wilding's fancies never to permit her niece to arrive unattended at their own little wayside station. No chance of her seeing anyone now, however,

and as the train stopped, Detta drew back into the corner to escape observation, pulling her veil down over her eyes, and pretending to be immersed in the newspaper which lay upon her lap. But a minute had scarcely passed before she started at the sound of a voice at her elbow.

There was nothing original, however, about the words which greeted her. They were merely a quiet "How are you, Miss Campbell?" uttered in the slow deliberate tones she knew so well; and the vivid flush that came over her features was caused as much perhaps by pleasure as by shamefaced consciousness of her still wet eyes.

She had never realised before how much she liked Mr. Conway, nor how sincerely she believed him her friend, as now, when in a fit of loneliness and low spirits, she fancied herself more than half cast adrift from all her English moorings.

"I am so glad to see you," she said, involuntarily giving him her hand with a smile; and the expression of her eyes emphasising her words.

It was a new thing for Detta, with her usual proud young self-reliance, to be clinging so eagerly, almost humbly, to the comfort of friendship; but the fact was no cause for dissatisfaction to Beresford Conway, as, taking advantage of it to retain her hand in his a little longer than custom usually requires, he stepped into the carriage and sat down beside her.

“You did your best to hide yourself from me,” he remarked as he did so.

“Yes,” said Detta, turning aside her flushed face for a moment. “But you know I did not expect to see any one here. You knew I was coming by this train?”

“Of course; Eva got your letter this morning. And I am the bearer of no end of messages from her and her mother.”

“Oh,” she said eagerly, “tell me, are they angry too? Do *they* think I have done wrong?”

“Eveleen thinks ‘you have behaved nobly, as you always do.’ Those are her words, not mine. I have brought a letter from her, which she says you are not to open till I am gone, as

there is nothing in it but gossip ; and I am to hear all your plans first."

"And Aunt Fanny?" she asked.

"Well, at first cousin Fanny was inclined to be a bit cantankerous ; but when she heard of Lady Dumbarton's behaviour, she—a—veered round. 'It was just what she would have expected of that narrow-minded old woman,' she said ; 'she had never had any heart herself, and could not comprehend it in others. It was the only fit and proper course for you to take under the circumstances ; and she was not the person to turn a cold shoulder towards her niece for—a--having more heart than prudence.'"

Detta's face was beaming now, and she smiled brightly.

"Dear aunt Fanny !" she exclaimed, "how kind and warm-hearted she always is."

"Yes," said Mr. Conway quietly. "Especially when Aunt Maria is unkind and calculating."

The weight that was lifted from Detta's mind was great. The fear of general disap-

probation which she had conjured up was dismissed ; and she talked freely, even gaily, to her companion.

There was so kindly a smile upon Mr. Conway's countenance—he was so little of the lover and so much of the friend—that she felt it easy to confide in him, and seek his advice upon her plans.

“ And you ? ” she asked, in her sudden rush of friendliness, anxious to assure herself of his good opinion.

“ You could not have done otherwise,” he replied, the little accent upon the pronoun just sufficiently perceptible to be gratifying. “ And now,” he said, “ tell me all you mean to do ; for my return examination will be exhaustive. You will not, I suppose, stop long in your Roman isolation ? ”

“ That depends, of course,” she replied, “ upon the nature of the Maestro's illness. If he gets much better, or,” she added in a lower tone, “ if he die, I may come back—not otherwise.”

“ In fact,” said Mr. Conway, looking grave, “ the length of your absence is absolutely un-

certain. When shall we meet again, Miss Campbell?"

"I don't know," said Detta half sadly. "I hope I shall see you all again some day; if," she added, somewhat shakily, "you haven't forgotten me."

"I am an awfully slow beggar to forget," he remarked, covering, Detta could not but feel, some deeper feeling under his lightness of tone; "I never can manage to forget anyone, not even my duns."

"Well," she said, "it may be that I shall come back very soon; so," and she laughed, "I won't grow sentimental about it."

"Whenever you do return," said Mr. Conway, "I was to tell you that you must consider yourself engaged to come at once to Eva's house. That was the particular message of all. Eva said I was to tell you she would never forgive you, if you went anywhere else before coming to her; and Drew was just as strong upon the point as she was. By the bye, Drew told me to deliver that message to cousin Detta with his—a—best love."

The sudden reaction of all this kindness

and these affectionate messages upset Detta for the second time that morning, and her eyes filled with quick tears which she strove in vain to keep from making their appearance. "You are all so good, so very good to me," she said in a low voice. And she never thought of feeling either indignant or surprised when for a moment she found her hand again imprisoned in a little friendly pressure in that of her neighbour. Afterwards only, it struck her as an odd proceeding on the part of a man usually so reserved and undemonstrative as Beresford Conway. But Detta was but eighteen; and, notwithstanding her one or two little love affairs, still an ignorant and simple-minded girl, who had yet to learn that the calmest and most undemonstrative of men can, when once thoroughly in love, comport themselves much in the same fashion as their less dignified and reticent brethren. Mr. Conway, however, seemed to have no idea of making further use of the present favourable opportunity for pressing that little matter on which he had spoken to Detta but a few

weeks ago, as they sat together on the breezy common that sloped away from Steynton Court. Such a proceeding was indeed very far from his purpose. Circumstances change all things; and, whatever his private sentiments, they did not override his present determination to avoid the subject. Friendship, however, was still permissible; and there was no reason why he should deny himself the pleasure of looking into those glorious dark eyes, and smiling back his most eloquent sympathy in response to their confiding glances.

“Eva?” he said, in answer to some remark of his companion’s—“Oh! Eva is unapproachable to mortal man, save, perhaps, at dinner-time (and dinner with her is only an act of courtesy, for she eats nothing). Curious it seems that happiness should be so intimately connected with the organs of digestion. She is all day long trying on gowns and veils and mantillas and furbelows of some sort. Even poor Arthur approaches—a—with trembling the door of the library, the room at present devoted to the dressmaker and her

mystic arts; and if she admit him, has to wade to her across seas of drapery, and through a cloud of frowns from the presiding goddess."

"Does aunt Fanny feel her loss as much now?" asked Detta.

Mr. Conway's brow became less smooth. It was evidently a painful subject to him. "She frets less," he said. "The excitement of the wedding and all this dressmaking takes it off her mind. She will feel it most when Eva is married, and she has—a—to leave Ashley."

"I had forgotten that," said Detta, half under her breath. "That will be a great trial to her, poor aunt!" she thought. But something in Mr. Conway's face prevented her putting her thought into words. Instead, she felt impelled to give him some little token of sympathy in return for his kindness, if only it might be acceptable.

"And you," she asked hesitatingly, "it must be a great change to you?" wondering the next moment whether it would not have been better to leave the subject alone, and

flushing bright crimson with the suspicion of a want of tact.

But his reply set her fears at rest. His voice had resumed its easy tone, and he gave that slight sound which was his nearest approach to a laugh. "I?" he asked. "Oh it is nothing to me. I am a man. In fact—a—it is an interesting lesson in life. It is remarkable what mistaken views we are apt to hold of ourselves. When we are placed upon the same financial level, we find how much—a—the intelligent working man is our superior. When one is put to it, one discovers that one has neither talent nor industry, is probably even short of the requisite physical capabilities. I myself am not clever enough to write books, or to start companies—couldn't even drive a plough or putty up a window!" He paused, and Detta glanced up in his face, uncertain whether to laugh, or to take his seriously spoken words as the expression of a melancholy truth. There was certainly nothing particularly melancholy about Mr. Conway's expression, as he gave a friendly

twirl to his long moustache; and the little unconscious self-complacency of the movement emboldened her to continue the conversation.

“Which did you think of doing?” she asked, with a gravity equal to his own. “The books or the plough, I mean?”

“I am mercifully relieved from the dilemma of a choice,” was the reply. “My father says something of offering me an agency in Ireland; which I shall probably accept, and expatriate myself amongst the Celtic savages of Galway for an indefinite period.”

Here the conversation was interrupted by the entrance of three passengers—a somewhat fussy, elderly clergyman, a stout, asthmatic wife, and a son of a serious countenance in gold spectacles.

The arrangement of themselves, their various books and parcels, was not achieved without much movement and confusion; and almost as soon as this was happily accomplished, the ticket collector presented himself at the door.

“Going on, sir?” he enquired, as Mr.

Conway proved to be minus the necessary ticket.

“No—a—that is to say, yes,” was the reply, causing a glance of curiosity from the asthmatic lady, and one of suspicion from the young man in the gold spectacles.

“You’ve barely time to get your ticket, sir.”

“Here, porter !” called Mr. Conway, “just get me a ticket.”

“Where for, sir ?”

“What’s the name of that big place about half an hour from here ?”

“Sturton, sir ?”

“Yes ! of course. Sturton. Name went out of my head. Look sharp and bring me a ticket.”

“I didn’t know you were going on,” said Detta innocently.

“No more did I,” her companion was upon the point of replying, changing his remark, however, in time into : “Well, I’ve business in this direction.”

Both the young man and his mother appeared highly suspicious as to the nature of

this business; but their critical looks little affected Mr. Conway; and Detta was far too simple-minded to be conscious of them, as, the ticket brought and the train steaming out of the station, she and her neighbour resumed their conversation.

The half-hour seemed like five minutes, and it was a cause of real regret to her when the smoky chimneys of Sturton came in sight.

“Are you going to cross by the mail to-night?” he asked, as the train slackened speed.

“Yes, I’m going to travel all to-night and sleep somewhere to-morrow — at Turin, perhaps.”

“It is not fit for you to go alone,” he remarked.

“You forget,” said Detta; “I’m a polyglot sort of creature. I’m not the least bit in the world afraid of anything. And the moment I set foot in Italy”—and her eyes brightened—“I shall be in my own country.”

“It isn’t fit,” he repeated, his eyes still fixed upon her. “I suppose it wouldn’t do for me to come with you and see you safe on board

the boat? We might," he added meditatively, "be taken for a runaway couple, perhaps."

"No," said Detta, in her determined little tone; "that wouldn't do at all. Besides, everyone is always so kind when one travels. Girls can go anywhere nowadays by themselves—English girls, I mean."

Mr. Conway's face by no means expressed a cordial assent to this opinion; but he was bound to acquiesce in the decision.

In another moment the train had stopped, Detta's two hands had been placed in his, and kept for a moment in a firm, warm clasp, while her bright young face, almost affectionate in its friendly gratitude, gazed up with a smile, not entirely removed from a suspicion of tears, into his. A minute later, and it was moving on its way again, leaving Mr. Conway on the platform and bearing Benedetta southward. She carried with her now, however, a very different heart from the heavy one which she had borne previous to his appearance. Now that she knew that she took with her the approbation of some of those she loved, her

thoughts no longer burdened her ; and, were it not for the Maestro's illness, the difficulties of a long and solitary journey would almost have dissolved themselves in the sort of adventurous amusement which they presented to a young girl full of life and spirit. She began humming softly to herself, and was quite oblivious of her companions and the observant looks with which the whole trio were regarding her over "Times," novel, and "Mills' Political Economy."

But she must open Eveleen's letter. As she did so, out of it, to her astonishment, fell a five-pound note, which fluttered to the feet of the solemn youth, and alighted so pointedly upon his boots, that he was perforce obliged to pick it up, and hand it, with a stiff bow, to his blushing neighbour.

Eva's letter was, as usual, a mixture of bright fun and kindliness. It had been written in a great hurry that morning previous to her cousin Beresford's departure ; and, for the most part, as he had said, contained nothing more important than light gossip over her own affairs, bemoanings over Detta's en-

forced absence from her wedding, and sympathy with her over its cause and Aunt Dumbarton's cantankerousness.

"Don't be a goose about this five pound note," she wrote; "it is just a little present from me. I dare say you are starting (with that common sense, which is your chief characteristic), like the proverbial fortune-makers, with two-pence halfpenny in your pocket. *That* you know is all very well for young Whittingtons, but it doesn't do for young ladies. I suppose when you get to the Maestro's, however, you will be all right? It would have been ten pounds only for this disgusting wedding frippery. I wish I had known before I ordered my trousseau that I was going to lose all my money! Such a mass of silks and satins that I should like now to turn into pianos, and arm-chairs, or cooking-ranges! *It is* such a bore. I wanted to put some of them up to auction to a girl I knew in Town, who is going to be married; but mama nearly had a fit when I named the idea, and Arthur is such an old goose that he backed her up; so I had to give it up.

Arthur, by-the-bye, is so devoted to you, that, if I were not, luckily for me, most highly appreciative of my own charms, I should feel it my duty to be jealous. Now, don't forget, Detta, that you come to us the moment you return to England. Arthur is counting the days to your visit. I tell him it is quite indecent—just upon the point of being married to another woman! But such are men; and we poor deluded woman-kind have to make the best of them. (N.B.—Oh! Detta, he *is* such a blessed old boy! I'm thinking all day long how little I deserve to be so very, very, V E R Y happy. If only we could find one like him for you—you dear old girl—but that's impossible!) The only person to hold a candle to him is Beresford. I can't tell you what a brick *he* too has been through all this worry; he never seems to think of himself. His father, Lord Court-hope, has offered him the use of an old house of theirs up in Derbyshire rent free, and Beresford has actually declined it, begging him to transfer the offer to mama, and himself applying for an Irish agency. The

Irish property is in an awfully wild, drear district, so you can imagine the miserable expatriation it would be to a man like Beresford, accustomed all his life long to every sort of luxury and society."

There was a good deal more in the two hastily scribbled sheets, which Detta read and re-read with a lingering pleasure; then letting them fall into her lap, whilst, with a smile upon her lips, she gazed out of the window pondering over their contents. We do not look very far ahead at eighteen; and as Detta's train sped along through the dull monotony of the midland counties, the tame scenery and grey sky brightened under the influence of an inner sunshine. There was no one in the world like Eveleen—no one—unless it were the Maestro. If only the Maestro would recover, how bright and happy would be life—whether spent in ministering to the old man's comfort in her own peerless native city, or taking up her abode with those English relations who showed her such cordial kindness. Beresford Conway, too, came in, unavoidably, for a share

of her reflections. How good and generous he always was. How few strangers would have given him credit for the fine qualities which underlay his conventional, and—must it be said?—his half-affected manner—the manner which had struck her so much at first, but which now she had grown accustomed to accept without comment—almost to like. How kind he had been to her that day; how much sympathy he had shown her; what a real friendly regard he seemed to feel for her. He was now completely her friend and nothing more—just what she had wished him to be.

But somehow, sometimes, when we have wished for a change, and the change comes, the transformation is apt to take us a little aback, and we do not feel quite so clear as to its comparative merits. It was certainly a little odd that Mr. Conway should have sat beside her for a full half-hour, and finally have parted from her without once referring, in the faintest manner, to the topic he had pressed upon her so earnestly the last time of their meeting. It was better so—in fact,

just as she had desired; still it was a little singular that a man of his disposition, neither young, thoughtless nor impulsive, should so quickly relinquish any object which he had at heart. Had he really changed his mind, and come to the conclusion that she was quite right, and that there were many women in the world that would suit him far better than herself? It was undeniably true. He was entitled to look for his wife in a rank superior to hers. Many women, rich and well born, cleverer, and more beautiful than she, might be quite willing to accept such a position. Besides, had she not told him that she would never care for him otherwise than as a friend; and was a sensible, experienced man of the world, fully alive to his own value, likely to hang on for months like a romantic schoolboy, in hopes of a retraction on her part? And yet—he had said he should! The smell of the sea and the cool west wind seemed again to be surrounding Detta as she recalled the words to which she had listened that day as they sat together on the Yorkshire sand-hills, overlooking the great brown cliffs,

the murmur of the distant waves mingling with their conversation.

“When I have made up my mind, I can be pig-headed enough,” he had said. “And until I hear you are going to marry someone else, I shall stick to it.” These had been strong words coming from Mr. Conway. Could he so soon have altered his determination?

And then Detta's cheeks suddenly crimsoned, and she reproached herself with a new, or hitherto undiscovered vice—that of wishing to retain the affections of one whose love she could not return. With considerable mental vigour, she accordingly repulsed the subject from her thoughts; and avoided enquiring too closely into the little sediment of dissatisfaction remaining in her mind.



CHAPTER IX.

IN ROME ONCE MORE.

IT was the evening of the third day since Benedetta's departure from England; and the Florence train was slowly puffing its way southward. Rome was nearing now; and before Detta's eyes as she sat leaning forward and eagerly gazing out of the window, came in sight the long green billows of the Campagna sea. Her heart swelled within her, and involuntarily she clasped her hands. How it recalled her childhood—the vision of that great, wide-stretching desert of grass, its solitudes unbroken by abode of man, and rarely traversed by human foot—the little hollows already lying in early twilight, whilst the uplands caught the last rays of a gorgeous sun in the act of setting behind gold and purple bars.

It had been a hot day, painfully stifling inside a railway carriage; and already the slow white mist was creeping up from the short grass and shimmering above the lonely plains.

Benedetta bent forward more earnestly, the colour rushing to her cheek, and the tears into her eyes. There, in the dim distance, like an unreal, unearthly thing, rose the great, grey dome, encircled by mists, and seeming to hang in the sky rather than to have its foundations in earth. Who has not felt their heart stir within them at the first sight of that vast mysterious cupola, greeting approaching travellers as a fit and solemn introduction to the further glories, yet to come, of the Eternal City?

And then the Campagna passed out of sight, and houses took its place; and beneath the almost overhanging shade of grand historic ruins, of walls that had seen the centuries roll by, of arches that had supported the weight of imperial processions—the noisy, snorting embodiment of travel of this our fussy, utilitarian nineteenth century, brought itself to a standstill in that greatest of all incongruities—the

railway station of Rome ; and in a moment all was bustle, shouting and confusion.

It was too far on in the season for the spring herd of foreign tourists—the frantic English-women in dust cloaks, brandishing sunshades and shrieking for the assistance of tardy porters in every language save the correct one—of excited Englishmen offering fees to the wrong people, and indignantly pursuing the luggage which had been forcibly torn from their protective grasp—nevertheless, the train was a full one, and Detta had to undergo some little pushing and elbowing from a non-descript and chiefly masculine crowd, before rescuing her small trunk, and seeing it placed upon the box seat of one of the open cabs, standing in the station piazza. Alas ! for the sacrilegious combination of ideas ! Cabs in imperial Rome, rattling with ignoble wheels over pavements once passed over by the gilded litters of emperors and empresses—down roads which had witnessed the triumphal passage of many a victorious general, followed by his scores of captives ; which had rung with the wild orgies of the Bona Dea and its frantic,

flower-garlanded women, or the Saturnalia, in whose lawless diversions consuls were not ashamed to join ! Corrupt, voluptuous, barbarous, magnificent old Rome, how are thy glories fallen !

But, as Detta placed herself in her carriage, she thought little of all this—she scarcely glanced at the ruins of an old temple, where, centuries ago, the Roman youths had been accustomed to offer their very life-blood to the presiding deity as a testimony of the strength and courage of their manhood—she did not even notice the pillar, half crumbled away into the dust of ages, where Cicero had once stood to harangue the Roman people with his burning words. Her thoughts were fixed upon the Maestro, and she was filled with a nervous fear as to the news that might greet her on reaching the Palazzo.

Would Ino still be there ? Would he have received her telegram despatched that morning from Florence, and be expecting her ?

When at length, after traversing the many stony streets, filled with the hot golden haze of a midsummer's evening, and turning obliquely

through the Corso already beginning to light up its long line of brilliant shops, the cab drew up before the entrance to the Palazzo Carbone, it was with fear and trembling that the girl alighted, and half groping her way through the darkened courtyard, began to mount the steep stone stairs. It felt like a dream to be again climbing that interminable staircase, up and down which she had pattered so often as a child. It seemed as if the past had completely returned to her and she was once again the little Piccola, creeping up with tangled hair and ragged dress, away from 'Nunciata's scoldings to the cool, calm refuge of her old Maestro's room. The very odours seemed the same—the hot, half-earthly smell that hung about the staircase, and the fumes of burnt coffee that rose from below, mixing with the sweeter scent of the orange trees that grew in the courtyard. She went slower and slower as she neared the top of the sixty odd steps; and her hand trembled as she laid it upon the bell attached to the entrance door of the third piano. In an instant, light sparkled through the window, and a foot-

step came tripping down the passage. The door was briskly opened, and on the threshold stood a pretty black-eyed servant. She smiled with bright welcome on seeing Benedetta, and hastily placing her oil lamp upon the table, ran back to one of the open doors within.

“La signorina, signor!” she exclaimed. And the next moment a tall figure in a holland suit came quickly out, and Ino was holding Detta’s hands in his warmest welcome.

“I got your telegram this morning,” he said, the light which the maid servant held falling upon his flushed face and glowing eyes; “but before that, I knew you would come. I knew my letter would bring you.”

“How is he?” she asked.

“Far better than we ever expected. He has rallied wonderfully. He is sitting up and can even speak and move. When I told him of your telegram this morning, he said, ‘I am content; the only wish I had left in life was to see the Piccola again!’”

Then without further words, they passed, hand in hand, together into the darkened

room. It had a great likeness, so it seemed to Detta, to the one where she had so often played six years ago. The same old armoire was there, the same old faded arm-chair, the same tattered crimson cushions on the window seats, and the same yellow hangings before the bed in the alcove. The lofty room was fairly fresh and cool, even at the close of a June day; and, glancing through the open windows, she recognised each dome and spire that stood outlined against the fading splendour of the gold and crimson sky, as one recognises the faces of long absent but once intimate friends. It was but a hasty glance, however; for Ino did not pause as he led her across the long room, saying, in his rich tones, full now of a tender congratulation, "*Ecco, Maestro mio; é la Piccola!*" And in another moment, Detta was kneeling beside the bed, and had flung her arms round the attenuated figure propped up against the pillows, laying her soft young cheek against the withered face of her old friend and guardian. The old man was too agitated for some moments to speak. He

could only clasp her in his shaking arms, whilst the hardly shed tears of old age coursed slowly down his cheeks. But presently he became calmer; and then Rafaelino moved the arm-chair up to the bed-side, and she sat down, holding in hers and gently stroking the long thin fingers. How well she remembered every line of the pale, dreamy, refined face! After sixty, a few years make but little difference to the appearance; and to Benedetta he appeared just the same—save for being thinner and more worn—as when she parted from him, hanging with such passionate grief round his neck, that cold January day.

To Cortauld too, it seemed almost as if the past six years had been recalled. For, to his sightless eyes, there was no shock of discovery in the fact that his child Piccola had now grown into a tall and graceful maiden; the touch of her soft, caressing hand was much the same, and so was the old loving way in which she crept up to him and smoothed the scanty, silken hair above his forehead; whilst her voice recalled old times yet more forcibly,

and was completely the voice of the little Piccola in its loving eagerness—that is to say of the Piccola in her softest and kindest moments.

“Talk to me of England,” he said presently, as Ino returned after a conversation he had been holding with Bettina, the bright-eyed servant girl, on the mundane subject of refreshment for the tired traveller.

Thus requested, Benedetta began to tell him of her English home and relations, dwelling chiefly upon the bright character and many attractions of her cousin Eveleen, presently joined by Rafaelino, who drew a chair to the other side of the bed, and chimed in pleasantly with his London reminiscences, and with a cordial assent to Detta’s panegyric on her cousin. There was nothing about Ino’s manner to suggest that he had any recollection of that episode in town, which Detta, before her arrival, had feared might be the cause of some constraint or estrangement between them.

Nothing could be more easy and friendly than the manner of the young sculptor; and

although at times somewhat silent, it was the silence rather of a natural thoughtfulness than of constraint.

“I am leaving on the morrow early,” he said, when at length, her modest supper over, and with the bells from the surrounding church towers clanging out eleven on the breathless night, Bettina came in to offer to show the Signorina to her bed-room. “I have to return to my work. I shall leave the Maestro now in good hands. You will write to me? And,” he continued more earnestly, “if you want me in any way, you will send for me, will you not? Remember it is but a few hours’ journey from Florence here.”

When, after a sweet, restful sleep of eight or nine hours, Benedetta arose the next morning from her bed in the cosy little room, which, though she knew it not, Ino had vacated for her benefit, and hastily dressing herself, entered the Maestro’s room, where the thick green shutters were fastened down to keep out the blazing eight o’clock sun, she found the young man already there

ready for departure, and seated on the invalid's bed for a last chat. His eyes lit up with pleasure as she came in; and rising, he bent to kiss her hand.

"You should have rested longer," he said reproachfully, his face at variance with his tone.

Benedetta laughed gaily. "I have rested quite long enough," she said. "Who could lie in bed in this bright sunshine? Do I look tired?"

"She looks as fresh as a rose, Maestro," said Ino, as Benedetta approached the old man.

"She *is* as fresh as a rose," said Detta brightly. "And she longs to see the dear old streets of Rome again by daylight. Shall I walk with you to the railway station, Ino?"

But, to her surprise, he hurriedly rejected her offer.

"No, O no, Signorina, that would never do!"

"Why not?" she asked. "And why am I 'Signorina?'"

“It would not do for you, an Italian young lady, to take me to the station,” he repeated, looking distressed.

“But I am half-English,” she replied, smiling. “I had forgotten Italian proprieties. Are you ashamed to be seen with me, Ino?”

The young sculptor’s face became perfectly crimson; and Detta saw that her thoughtless fun was beyond his appreciation.

“Ashamed!” he stammered. “Ah Dio! how can you say such a thing? It would be too much honour for me. But in Rome the young ladies do not such things—I could not bear for anyone to think that you should so far condescend——”

He paused, unable to express himself more clearly; but from the look of real pain upon his face, Benedetta saw that she must desist alike from her Anglican contempt of Italian etiquette, and from the proposal itself. Therefore making up her mind to satisfy her cravings with a solitary walk, so soon as the cool of evening had set in, she contented herself with accompanying Ino on his departure

to the head of the stone staircase, down which Bettina was already tripping in light-hearted good humour, bearing the traveller's bag. She was still standing there, leaning absently against the iron balustrade, when the girl returned, and, according to the manners of her country-women, paused to have a little friendly conversation with her new lodger. From her Detta learned without difficulty many interesting facts—to wit, that the piano was kept by her aunt, the Signora Scalchi; and that, beside the Maestro and herself, there were three other visitors residing on it, namely, two American ladies and their maid.

“The Signora Mor-se is grand—very grand—maestosa,” said Bettina, extending her arms, apparently to imply the vastness of the lady's physical proportions. “The Signorina is little, and light, and gay. We two are friends, Oh! great friends. The aunt Scalchi is cross, disagreeable—yes, detestable at times.” And Bettina shrugged her pretty shoulders with prodigious emphasis. “You will hear her some day—she can scold,

Ah Dio mio ! with a tongue louder than the clock at San Pietro. But I, I am always good-tempered—I do not mind it ; I laugh. “ Ah ! ” she said, suddenly changing her theme, “ but the young Signor that is just gone is charming, is he not, S’rina ? So handsome and so kind, and with such sweet words for everybody. And,” she continued, fixing her piercing black eyes with sudden penetration upon her companion, “ how he loves you, Signorina ! Anybody blind of one eye can see that. He cannot love in vain, surely ? ”

But here the conversation came to a sudden conclusion, as Detta turned abruptly away and re-entered the passage.

As she did so, a door at the end opened, and a fluffy golden head looked out.

“ Colazione, Bettina ! e presto-prestissimo ! ”

“ Subito, subito, signorina ! ”

“ No, no, Bettina ; e sempre subito ! Non mi piace il ‘ subito.’ Dico ‘ prestissimo ! ’ ”

Bettina shrugged her shoulders and ran away laughing, whilst Miss Morse, perceiving Detta for the first time, protruded her head a

little further, the better to take a good survey of the new lodger. Her inspection appeared to satisfy her. "Buon giorno," she remarked graciously, just as Detta was turning in at the Maestro's doorway.

Her salutation was returned politely enough; but a strong desire to laugh prevented Detta from pausing to receive further notice.

It was a strangely quiet day—that first day spent in the sick man's room—monotonous, but far from unpleasant. After her long journey, the rest was not without its charms for Benedetta; and hour by hour passed calmly by in the still, shaded room, as she and the Maestro recalled unwearyingly the incidents of former days, or related to each other the experiences through which each had passed since parting.

The blind musician was sufficiently recovered from his sudden seizure to be able to converse with pleasure; he was almost free from pain, and his young attendant began already to hope that after a time he might possibly be up and about again. Bernard

Cortauld smiled half-apologetically as she expressed this hope in words.

“I ought not to have asked you to come all this distance. I thought I was going to die,” he remarked pathetically. “But in truth,” he continued after a pause, as he stretched out his feeble arm to feel for the violin which lay beside him, “I fancy there is not much of life or power left in me. I shall be but a useless log; and you, my child, will have a dreary time of it if you stick by the old man. Probably even,” he said, in a trembling voice as he drew his darling instrument closer to him, stroking the strings with a loving touch, “my hands have lost their cunning. That indeed would be worse than death; but be it as God wills.”

“No, oh no!” cried Detta eagerly, “that is not gone from you. You can still play, I am sure. See, your fingers have still plenty of power in them.” For it made her heart ache to think of the old man bereft, in his darkened solitude, of the one solace which to him embodied all that was beautiful to eye

and ear and heart. "Play to me now," she added, "and convince yourself that it is so."

But the nerveless hand had already relaxed its grasp.

"No," he said, "not now. I haven't strength as yet. But," and a smile crept slowly over his features, "something tells me that it may return. My fingers at least are not paralysed; and I thank God for that."

The walk which Detta had promised herself did not come off till after dark; for the heat of the sun was too intense to admit of her going out before sunset; and then, by the Maestro's particular desire, she requested Bettina's attendance, and had perforce to await the good pleasure of that sprightly maiden, whose duties detained her until a late hour, when all the stars were out twinkling in the blue dome that overspread the great city's intricate ways

Bettina appeared delighted with the company of the signorina, and was a most voluble and

animated companion ; nevertheless Benedetta found her attendance a little burdensome. Her unceasing flow of conversation was somewhat exhausting ; and she had an excessive partiality for the neighbourhood of shops and crowded streets, appearing unpleasantly surprised when Benedetta expressed herself desirous of seeking quieter and less frequented paths.

At length, however, after an hour spent in slowly elbowing their way through the noisy and good-tempered crowds that filled the Corso, and examining, with a protracted and minute scrutiny, the long line of jewel shops which adorned that street, Benedetta succeeded in drawing her companion out of this fascinating vortex of life and fashion into the romantic solitude of the Pincian Hill. How perfect it would have been here save for the ceaseless childish chatter. Detta laid her arms upon the stone wall, and, leaning her face upon them, drank in the beauty of the great grey city spread mysteriously out before her, whilst the stream of words which still flowed from Bettina's lips passed by her

unheard, like the sound of distant running water.

When at length they returned homewards and made their way up the long stone staircase and into the narrow passage, the lights were out and everybody was gone to bed—everybody, that is, except the Signora Scalchi, who had kept herself up for the pleasure of soundly rating her niece Bettina.

This rating, of which Benedetta was an involuntary auditor, and which had for its text the double fact of being out so late and of wasting so much valuable time, was not devoid of uncomplimentary reference to the new Signorina, and strengthened the latter in her determination to take her walks for the future alone and at an early hour, if possible soon after sunrise.

This resolution she carried into effect the next morning sufficiently early to find time for a good long stroll amongst her old haunts before the strength of the sun drove her indoors.

She was returning from her expedition

when she came into contact with Miss Morse, attired in gorgeous dressing-gown and with dishevelled hair, in the act of making her way to her mother's sitting room.

The young American treated her with much friendliness, and with a rush of Yankee-accentuated Italian.

“‘E una bella matina,’” she remarked laboriously. “‘Come sta, signorina?’”

“‘Benissimo,’” replied Benedetta. “‘But we both talk English, do we not?’”

“Good gracious me!” exclaimed Miss Morse. “Why, Bettina told me you were Italian.”

“So I am—half.”

“And what's the other half?”

“Scotch!” replied Detta, with equal brevity.

“You have come to look after that old man in there, haven't you?” enquired Miss Morse, with a wave of her arm in the direction of the Maestro's room. “Any relation?”

“No,” said Detta, unable to prevent herself smiling at this catechism. “Only an old friend and guardian.”

“ Very sick, ain’t he ? ”

“ Yes, he is very ill ; but he is getting better now, I hope.”

“ Ah ! well, I guess it ain’t too lively for a young girl like you to be sitting up there all day with nobody to talk to but a blind old man. Are you going to stop long ? ”

“ I can’t say,” replied Benedetta, unable to take offence at the extremely good-natured tone of her questioner. “ Until he is better, I suppose.”

“ We go next week,” remarked Miss Morse. “ We came too late : and now it’s too hot to do anything. We are not afraid of a bit of sun in New York. It can take the skin off a man’s face pretty quick there sometimes—but we ain’t *quite* salamanders, you know, for all that ! ”

“ Of course not,” said Detta, beginning to wish that her companion would move out of the way, and allow her to pass on.

“ Well now,” continued the other, “ you’d better come in and have a bit of dinner with us this evening. Ma will be pleased to see you, and I guess anyway it’s better than sit-

ting moping in there so many hours. I guess you are musical? Well then, we'll have some singing. You'll come, will you, at eight? That's fixed."

And Miss Morse sailed on in her blue dressing-gown, her streamers fluttering behind her.



CHAPTER X.

BETTINA'S LOVE AFFAIRS.

THE second day was in all respects much the same as the first. Life at the top of the old palazzo in these hot summer days was still and soundless in the extreme ; scarcely a footfall was heard along the passage, and the distant roar that rose from the streets but faintly penetrated within the closed shutters of the old man's room.

As evening approached, Benedetta prepared to pay her promised visit to her American neighbours. Lights were already lit in the neighbouring apartment, where, on tapping a little timidly, Miss Morse herself opened the door and drew her in with considerable cordiality to be presented to her mother. Mrs. Morse was indeed, as Bettina had stated, very great, very majestic—that is to say, she

was a person both tall and stout, largely possessed of the characteristic termed presence, and dignified to pomposity both in speech and manner. Her colouring was as lavish and unsparing as the proportions of her person. She was a somewhat handsome woman, with her scarlet cheeks and great black eyes; and eclipsed her fair little daughter much in the same way that a brilliant peony might extinguish the chaster glories of a spring crocus. Her voice was peculiar, being full and sonorous, with a slight rattle in it, not unlike what one might imagine would be the roar of a bull if forced to issue through the spout of a kettle.

The dinner was pleasant enough, and Detta got on well with her new friends. They were neither refined nor polished; but they were people of talent, and full of kindness. Everything about them denoted comfort without extravagance; and they were evidently persons of moderate income, and of the New York middle class. There are Americans and Americans. There is the quiet and cultivated Bostonian, innocent almost to the least touch

of his national twang, apt to be somewhat reticent and reserved; there are the New York millionaires, flashing with showy vulgarity, outraging the very vanguard of fashion, and surrounded by a cohort of uppish ladies' maids and couriers; and there are again their quieter compatriots, people of various degrees of birth and education, but of limited means, who intend to gratify their desire for travel in a modest and unostentatious way. The Morses belonged to this latter class—one of whose existence many Englishmen and Englishwomen, frequenting only fashionable resorts and monster hotels, have scarcely even heard.

Mr. Morse had been by no means a gentleman, but he had wisely understood the value of education, and his daughter was an accomplished girl. He had indeed held the position of a pork butcher, which, in the city of New York, where sucking-pigs and other porcine dainties are usually at a premium, secured him a handsome income, which fortunate speculation had enabled him to augment. It was during this golden period

that Annie, as her mother called her, had been sent to school in Paris, where she had made great progress under her many and various masters. National feeling was, however, strong within her breast, and she had returned home after several years' absence, as perfect a little Yankee as the day she quitted her native shore. All this, however, happened some years ago.

Since then the pork butcher had left this sphere for one from which pigs are, it is to be hoped, excluded ; and Mrs. Morse, after duly lamenting him for a couple of years or so, made up her mind that her somewhat diminished income was still sufficient to gratify what is, as a rule, the prevailing ambition of all Americans—and to permit her to pay a visit to the Old World. This she and her daughter had been doing for the past year and a half ; and, having arrived somewhat too late in the season at Rome, were consoling themselves with the prospect of returning thither for some months the following winter.

Most of this was communicated to Detta in a surprisingly open and friendly manner by

her new acquaintances, who appeared to have taken a great fancy to her. Dinner over, Miss Morse sat down to the piano, proving herself no mean musician, singing and playing alternately, and concluding with a duet in which the deep tones of her mother's voice came out with agreeable effect.

"How well you play," remarked Detta, as her young hostess turned round and vacated the music stool; "it is a treat to hear you."

"Well," said Miss Morse reflectively, "I *ought* to. I calculate I've had as many masters as there are weeks in the year. And as for music—if you were to put all the pieces together that I have learned since I was a child, I guess they'd top the Tower of Babel. But it's your turn now."

Though feeling a little nervous, Detta took her place, and not a word was spoken by mother or daughter, as, from memory, she sang a simple Scotch ballad, the full, sweet tones of her magnificent voice filling the small room with a volume of sound which was too well modulated to be overpowering.

At the conclusion of her song, however, she

found herself gently pushed back into her seat.

“You’ll just sit right down again,” said Miss Morse, “and sing us two or three more. I’ll never care to hear myself sing again, now I’ve heard you!”

Detta complied without answering. The words she had been singing vividly recalled to her mind the last time they had been on her lips, in the snug little drawing-room of Mrs. Wilding’s London apartments. She had then been giving one Italian song after another at Ino’s desire, he turning over the pages of her music with his usual silent wrapt attention, when Beresford Conway, leaning back in indolent posture on the sofa close by, had interposed.

“Come, Miss Campbell,” he said, “you show too much partiality for your native land. Give us something that belongs to Great Britain now.” And then she had sung this song, and his comment upon it had been: “You should always sing those simple airs. Your voice is too true and pathetic for the mere trills and rushes of operatic songs.”

“Well,” said Miss Morse, when at length she was allowed to rise and relinquish her seat, “it’s a real luxury, this is. You’ll have to come in here every night, I guess, and sing to us, till we go.”

“And you to me,” replied her visitor smiling.

“Signor Cortauld is also a great musician, is he not?” enquired the elder lady.

“He was,” said Detta. “I used to listen to him entranced, as a child. He would play by the hour, melody after melody, each more exquisite than the last. I have never heard music like it since.”

“His own compositions?” enquired Mrs. Morse.

“I believe so. It is nearly seven years since I heard him, but I shall never, never forget it. He appears carried up into a new world—a world of strange wonderful dreams, expressed in harmonies one seems never to have heard before. You go with him, and it is just like visiting amongst the angels.”

Detta had lost herself in one of her short characteristic fits of enthusiasm. Her hands

moved in earnest gesture, her eyes glowed, and she was evidently speaking more to herself than to those around her. She started a little when Miss Morse, who had been staring at her with undisguised wonder, drew her down to earth again with a practical remark:

“That’s where you get your music from, listening to that old man, ain’t it?”

“Perhaps,” said Detta. “But, I think, there are very few of my countrymen and countrywomen who have not naturally some sense of music.”

“The other one—the young one—is he musical?” enquired Miss Morse.

“He loves to listen to it, like all Italians,” replied Detta.

“He’s an artist, ain’t he?” continued the young lady, whose forte certainly lay in her craving for information—a craving which even the extensive and varied gossip daily supplied by Bettina appeared insufficient to satisfy.

“He is a sculptor,” returned Detta. “And,” she continued proudly, “will some day be a great one, I have little doubt.”

“ Ah ! ” said Mrs. Morse, “ he looks a smart young man.”

“ Why don't he take his own bust ? ” enquired her daughter. “ It would do for a model of Adonis.” Here she turned her bright and somewhat beady eyes with a searching glance towards her companion. “ Tell us now,” she said persuasively, “ he's awful spoons on you, ain't he ? ”

But Detta had risen.

“ It is growing very late,” she said. “ Signora Scalchi will scold me if I stop up any longer.”

“ You're not offended ? ” asked Miss Morse. “ I always speak out. Well, if you must go ; but you'll come around to-morrow night and give us another song ? ”

The next few days passed not unpleasantly. Day by day the musician, with unexpected vigour, rallied more and more, and ere the week was over had risen from his bed, and though comparatively feeble, and unable to return to the duties in which, previous to his seizure, he had been engaged, yet was able to move about, to resume his beloved occupa-

tion, and rather to enjoy cheerful society than to require sick nursing. He was still too weak to do more than move across the long bare room. One side indeed was so far paralysed that he would probably never again descend the long staircase of the Palazzo Carbone; but this matter seemed of little import to him so long as his fingers could once more caress the strings of that instrument which was the darling child of his old age.

Hour by hour, as Benedetta reclined in the window-seat, hoping to catch any stray waft of fresher air that might mingle with the scorching heat ascending from the town below—where the stones of the piazzas burnt the feet of the passers-by, and the houses on either side of the narrow streets seemed to give out a glow like the fumes of a live furnace—the musician sat upright in his chair, unconscious of time, heat, or fatigue, soft, weird strains rising and falling upon the breathless air, and his very heart seeming to speak to the heart of the violin. At these times he was unconscious of everything that

went on around him, and needed no company, and Detta would creep in and out of the room without notice. But afterwards, when exhaustion compelled him to desist, and the failing fingers would no longer fulfil their appointed task, and paint in descriptive symphonies the thoughts that continued to surge through his brain, the old man would fold his hands and lean wearily back, with a look of unutterable sadness that went to the girl's heart.

"I am fit for nothing now," he would say, "and never shall be again. I shall never teach another pupil; I shall never fill my place again in the orchestra; never take my part at the opera. I do but cumber the earth; and you, my Piccola, are too young and fresh and happy to be left alone with a miserable old man."

Then it was Benedetta's time to soothe and comfort her companion; to talk to him of the old days, and amuse him by childish reminiscences, gently withdrawing him from that profound melancholy which was but too congenial a companion to the sensitive

mind of the blind musician. And when she succeeded, and the smile returned to the worn face, and cheerfulness to his tones, she felt that she was in part repaying the debt of that ungrudging tenderness which had been lavished upon her in her childhood.

She saw a good deal of her neighbours the Morses. Both mother and daughter were unaffectedly kind and cordial to her. Almost every day they drew her into their rooms on some pretext or other. There was much sympathy between Miss Morse and herself on some points.

The young American was devoted to art as well as music, and once or twice persuaded Detta, when the sun was less baking than usual, to accompany her to some picture gallery or some museum of sculpture, where the acuteness of her remarks and the general knowledge she displayed, excited the admiration of her companion. Anastasia Morse was in fact no ordinary girl, although deficient in the polish to which Detta had been accustomed among her English friends ;

and when, after a short time, she and her mother departed, there was sincere regret on both sides.

“Good-bye, good-bye!” said Miss Morse, kissing her affectionately on both cheeks. “I’ve never seen any girl I like so well as you since I left New York. We shall be back in November; and then we’ll have no end of good times, if you are here still.”

And Benedetta returned to her little room in the empty flat, feeling it somewhat drear and silent.

In those fierce summer days, the old Palazzo seemed like a living tomb; the heat grew more and more intense, the trees withered in the courtyard, the haze that hung about the city seemed made of molten brass; the Maestro lay back wearily in his chair, forgetful even of his instrument until the evening, and Signorina Scalchi herself forbore to scold with her usual vehemence, and melted into a half-fretful querulousness. As for Detta, she crept about more and more languidly, scarcely able to breathe, and feeling it too great a trouble to move; her cheeks growing

paler day by day, and her steps more dragging.

It was indeed a terribly hot summer even for Rome, and unhealthy above the average; and it was probably to the fact of her Roman extraction, that the girl owed her immunity from the fever daily extending its ravages amongst those few foreign residents whom poverty or circumstances prevented moving to a cooler spot.

Bettina was the only one unaffected by the weather. Bettina was always healthy, always bright, always busy; she danced about as nimbly, and sang her Tuscan songs as gaily, when the thermometer was at a hundred in the shade, when the parched earth cracked and started beneath the piercing rays of a tropical sun, when the half-naked beggar boys lay all day, face downwards, on the steps of the Trinità del Monti, when the very dogs crept beneath the houses into patches of shade a few inches square—with the same alacrity, the same light-heartedness and the same insouciance, as if it were still the sweet spring time with the soft cool wind blowing over

Campagnan steppes, and the flowers bursting out of every crevice in the ruined palaces of the Cæsars.

She was the only one who noticed Benedetta's pallor and increasing lassitude. The old man who loved her had no eyes to perceive any change in her appearance; and when in his company, she always roused herself to speak with her habitual cheerfulness.

"You should go out more, Signorina," exclaimed the handmaiden, running in to Benedetta's room early one Sunday morning. "Look, I have been to Mass, and I have got two bouquets. Which will you have?" And she held up a crimson and a white camellia. "The white one? There, I will fasten it in your hair for you. Now you look beautiful—far too beautiful to sit moping here all day! Come out, come out; it is not yet too hot, and all the people are streaming from the churches, and the piazzas look so gay. It will do you good."

For Bettina had a warm heart, and had conceived a strong affection for her young

companion. But Benedetta felt the sun to be too oppressive to venture forth, and turned the conversation.

“Who gave you these, Bettina?” she asked.

“Two of my lovers, signorina,” replied the Italian girl promptly.

“Two? Oh, fie, Bettina, to have two at a time!”

“Santa Maria! There are a dozen at least! How can I help it—I, who am a pretty girl? Look, this one is Guiseppe’s, and that is Giacomo’s; you have chosen Giacomo’s. Giacomo gave me his going into church. ‘You will wear this for my sake, signorina Bettina,’ said he; ‘I will make you my little sposa some day.’ But Guiseppe met me with the other coming out. ‘I’ve a flower for you, Bettina,’ said he; ‘but as I see you have already a bouquet from someone else, I will give it to another girl.’ ‘What then?’ said I; ‘may not the young signorina that lodges in my house give me a camellia from the vase that stands upon the table?’ (For Guiseppe is handsome and agreeable, sig-

norina, and one does not want to vex him.) 'Altro,' says he, 'if that is the case, and the signorina gave it to you, you shall have mine as well. For you are my sweetheart, Bettina.'” And Bettina’s eyes gleamed with sparkling fun as she laughed long and merrily over this recital of the morning’s amatory episodes.

“But, Bettina,” said Detta, taking a friendly interest in these complex love affairs; “which do you really care for? You cannot marry both, you know.”

Bettina tossed her head with pretty scorn and laughed again.

“Guiseppe is cross,” she said, “and morose. I do not like him; but I do not make him angry, because I am afraid of him. Giacomo is agreeable, so I do not vex him because he pleases me. But there! I know the men; I am not one to marry. They may all come after me, but I will have none of them—neither Guiseppe, nor Giacomo, nor anyone else.”

“Why, Bettina?” asked Detta, smiling. “What makes you think so ill of matrimony?”

“Ah!” said Bettina, shaking her head sagely, “I know better. Signorina,” she continued more earnestly, “I have had many friends married—bright, gay young girls like me—now, in a few years, they are haggard, miserable old women. I know what the men are like, and what the Roman husbands are—a few kind words, and a day or two of petting and flattery—and then off to the lottery to waste all their earnings, to spend their nights in riot and dissipation, only coming home to abuse the poor wretched wife. No, signorina; marriage is all very well for ladies and gentlemen, and there are plenty of foolish, ignorant girls in my rank of life ready to run their neck into the noose—but *I* know better—I have had experience. I just play with the men, and it amuses them and me; but, so soon as they begin to speak of the priest and the wedding ring, then——” and she snapped her slight, brown fingers, “I am off like a bird, and they don’t see me again till they have recovered their senses!”

From which it will be seen that Bettina, although a light-hearted and somewhat light-

headed young woman, was not without a touch of native shrewdness, and held firmly to her own epicurean philosophy upon some matters.

It had not taken long for the Tuscan maiden to acquaint herself with the fact that in no way could she please the signorina better than by bringing her a letter with a foreign post-mark. The post-bag at the Palazzo was nothing more nor less than a bucket. This bucket, morning and evening, was lowered by means of a cord from the highest storey into the hall below, the letters being deposited therein, when it was drawn up again, thus sparing the postman the toilsome ascent of the seventy steps. The postman was, however, one of Bettina's many admirers; and love scorns fatigue, even under a temperature of 90 degrees in the shade.

One morning, Bettina ran in laughing gaily as she flung a letter into Detta's lap.

"Ah! the men, the men!" she exclaimed, how foolish they are! and how soft, until they have caught their bird! This idiot of a

Paolo ! He comes toiling up the staircase with his letters this morning instead of waiting for the bucket ; ‘It is to wish you good morning,’ he says to me. ‘You have the prettiest face in all Rome, Signorina Bettina,’ says he. ‘And you have come from the bottom to tell me nothing newer than that ?’ said I, to tease him. ‘Why, I have often heard that before, Paolo Brilli !’ ‘Ah, Sapristi !’ says he, looking crest-fallen, ‘others have said it from the lips, but I say it from the heart, carina. I have brought you a ribbon to wear at the festa next Thursday. You will put it round your neck and think of me, will you not, mia bella ?’ ”

And without waiting for a reply to her anecdote, Bettina ran out of the room again, while Detta proceeded to open her letter. From Eva, of course. Eveleen and her mother were her sole correspondents. Since her departure, she had never received one line from Lady Dumbarton—not even in response to a pleading little epistle she had sent a few days after her arrival in Rome. This complete estrangement grieved Detta,

who was not without love for her stern Scotch kinswoman. She had written again a few weeks later, telling the details of her daily life, enquiring anxiously after her aunt's health, and adding at the end a humbly-worded little petition for forgiveness and restoration to the old affection. This letter, too, had remained unanswered; convincing the girl of the impossibility of moving a resolution once taken by Lady Dumbarton, or of smoothing down the hard edges of her prejudices.

Eveleen's letter was of much the same description as usual. Her marriage appeared entirely to have fulfilled its promise of happiness; and happiness upon a character like Eva's, had an effect at once softening and elevating.

Her husband was devoted to her; and this devotion, instead of rendering her selfish, seemed to enlarge her sympathies towards all the world, and increase her affection for those she had before loved. Hers had been a cramped nature, twisted by circumstances out of its natural course; now it expanded

itself unchecked in the wholesome atmosphere of a congenial marriage.

A large portion of her letter was of course given up to the discussion of this domestic felicity, and of the perfections of the man to whom a blissful fate had united her ; also to the expression of that desire commonly felt by the bride towards her unmarried friends, that a happiness in some degree parallel, and a husband—(not of course equal to their own, but in some faint degree after the same pattern)—might some day fall to Detta's share. But a corner of it was, as usual, devoted to the honourable mention of her cousin Beresford Conway. Beresford had been so very, very kind, so generous, as he always was ; there was no one like him in the world (except, of course, Arthur). He had insisted upon making Mrs. Wilding change places with him as regarded the house which had been lent him rent-free. He and his father had come to some understanding on the matter (though no one could guess how, for old Lord Courthope was such a screw, the only wonder was

that he had not allowed Beresford to break stones upon the high road!) and Mrs. Wilding was already gone thither to take up her permanent abode. Eva was afraid that Beresford had been rash. No one could possibly blame him for what had occurred; and her mother knew how more than ready, how anxious, she and Arthur were to welcome her in their own little home. But Beresford declared the place would not suit him; English country life without horses or hunting would be the death of him; he would find far more amusement and far less ennui up in the wilds of Ireland, where shooting and fishing were to be had with little trouble, a rough pony answered all the demands of social life, and the chance of a breeze with the tenantry lent the necessary spice of excitement. If his father would give him the Irish agency, he would do very well. "And," added Eva with a little touch of sententious morality quite new from her, and which brought a smile to her cousin's lips, "no doubt he is right, and has chosen for the

best. He will be a shooting star of the first magnitude lost on the horizon of the fashionable world; but, with useful work to do, he will be a happier man, because a better and manlier one." After this little flourish of her moral trumpet, Eva returned to gossip, and to many kindly questions respecting her cousin's life and welfare. "When are you returning home?" she asked. "We all long to see you again; but I dare say Rome is too bewitching, and the Maestro too engrossing, to allow you to come back as yet. I suppose the Maestro is well off, and that you have everything you want? I think that sort of Bohemian life must be jolly, and I should fancy you had rather a talent for it. It must have been very dull at first while the poor old man was so ill and feeble, but now that he is up and about again I daresay you have plenty of fun. I can fancy you, prim, solemn, little Detta, sitting surrounded by a lot of his musical friends, receiving their homage gravely, and all your soul in your eyes as you listen to their playing. What delicious

concerts you must have! But don't go and lose your heart, little one, to one of those swarthy-browed, black-eyed, velveteen-dressed musicians—(you see I know what they are like)—it is too precious for that. You must keep it for some true-hearted, fair-faced Englishman, who will bring you to live near us in your father's country."

Benedetta's eyes wore an amused expression as she laid her letter down. How little her cousin knew of the circumstances of her life, when she drew these pictures of the nightly concerts, and of the Maestro's circle of swarthy-browed friends! How astonished would she have been had she known that, since her arrival, but one friend had sought out the old man in his lofty apartment, and that one little likely to disturb her repose of mind, either by his Bohemian fascinations, or by his proffered homage—a man older than the Maestro, with bent figure, snowy hair and beard—one who, since the Maestro's retirement, had been first violin in the company to which Bernard Cortauld had belonged. This was indeed, perhaps, the only intimate friend

possessed by the latter in all the width and breath of the great city. Singularly taciturn and reserved as he had always been, he was not a man to make friends easily or lightly. His natural generosity and goodness of disposition had indeed more than once in bygone years evoked a grateful love in the heart of some poor struggling toiler for daily bread ; but the secluded life consequent upon his age and physical infirmity had of late put a stop to any new intimacies, while all those with whom in younger days he had held familiar relations, seemed now by death or circumstances to be taken from him. There were but two persons living in whom he could be said to have any deep interest, Rafaelino Bartolucci, and the girl who to him was still “ Piccola.” One of these was removed by absence, but the other had been brought by a merciful providence to cheer his declining years, and to sit beside him in a lingering twilight ; to renew his faded memories of a beautiful and glorious world ; and, with her soft hand upon his withered fingers and her smooth cheek pressed against his haggard face, to chase

away the oft-returning demon of despondency. Compared to these two, the Signor Moroni, kind old friend though he were, was but an acquaintance of yesterday.

For a moment Detta pondered over that other remark of Eveleen's "When was she returning to England?" Ah! when? Pictures of soft, delicious English summers, such as she had known, rose before her; when the nights were refreshing and the days exquisite; when the green boughs waved freshly in the scented breeze, and the unscorched flowers gazed up without flinching to the noon-day sun; days when she and Eveleen sat out in the shade, working all morning, and in the evenings strolled about through the dewy coolness of the darkening lanes. How different from the dreary parching heat of this Roman summer, where the very grass withered down upon its stems, turning black in its despair before it died; where the very wind that blew brought only added discomfort in its hot Sirocco breath, and where the waters of the Tiber rolled sluggishly and slow, like half coagulated oil! But from that

seductive picture Detta resolutely turned away. She dared not look and long. No! here she would remain. What ray of light would penetrate the heavy darkness encompassing the old man's daily path were she to desert him now? To consequences, to the future, she must shut her eyes. God would provide. Sufficient for her was it to know her duty in the present.



CHAPTER XI.

A FAITHFUL HEART.

THE hot summer months passed away, July into August and August into September, without many events of consequence to mark their passage in the quiet life at the top of the old Palazzo. Only one or two incidents had occurred which in any way affected Detta. One was the departure of Bettina for her home near Pistoja. The Tuscan girl was of an affectionate nature, and was sincerely sorry to say good-bye to the young signorina whose age was so near her own. and whose solitary and monotonous life, according to her views, must be so terribly dull and unsatisfying.

“It will be worse for you when I am gone,” she said, as she came in to make her farewells. “Not a soul to speak to except the poor sick signor, and the Aunt Scalchi with her cross looks. Ah! Dio mio! fancy being shut up

all alone with a blind vecchio and a nasty termagant ! ”

“ Yes,” said Detta, “ I shall miss you much, Bettina. You are always so bright. Are you glad to go ? ”

“ But, yes, signorina, of course I am glad. Who would not be glad to leave this furnace of a town, and an old woman’s scoldings, and get back to my beautiful country home ? Ah ! there are my father and mother, and the little ones, and the Bimbo ; and,” she added, her face dimpling (Was it with the memory of past or the thought of future conquest) ? “ all my cousins—Giulio, and Carlo, and Tito. And when the work is over in the evening we all sit out under the vines in the garden, and talk and laugh, and the moon and the stars come peeping through the trellis-work overhead, and Tito sings a song, and we are all so happy. Ah ! signorina, how I wish you could be there too. I shall often, often think of you,” she finished, raising Benedetta’s hand to her lips and kissing it repeatedly.

“ You are a good girl, Bettina,” said Detta. “ Shall you never come back again ? ”

“Ah! si, signorina, perhaps. I hope so. When the autumn comes on and Aunt Scalchi has her rooms full, then she will send for me again most likely; and I shall be glad to come, for your sake. Adieu, dear, dear signorina.”

After Bettina's departure the Palazzo seemed more silent than ever, and Signora Scalchi's flat a perfect tomb. And, in their absolutely eventless life, stirred by no breath of the outside world, nor by anything more exciting than an occasional English letter or an evening call from old Maroni, the diversion of an unexpected visit from Ino was doubly welcome to both Cortauld and his companion. The young man had suddenly found himself able to obtain two days' leave of absence, and had rushed off forthwith to spend them in his old home. Hard work and oppressive days took little effect upon Rafaelino. He seemed wonderfully happy in his love of his profession, his mind was full of ambition, and growing success had brought a new light to his eye and a new dignity to his manner. Not that the young sculptor was in any way spoiled or rendered conceited by his

late triumphs. He was simple as ever, and perhaps more genial than before.

But he was beginning to reap the reward of his devotion to art, in that entire contentment which is so rarely the fruit of the other pursuits which chiefly engage men's attention—namely, love or pleasure, commerce or money-making. Day by day Rafaelino, flung by his profession into a mixed society, and yet absorbed by the most perfect ideals and the highest vein of thought, became at once a better man of the world and a truer artist.

But the feelings he entertained for Benedetta had changed no whit. To sit in the same room with her was to him an almost sufficient happiness; the simple meals they shared were glorified into Olympian repasts of nectar and ambrosia; whilst if he walked beside her, the stony ways of old Rome became to him the golden streets of Paradise!

He had but just competed for and won the distinction of executing some monuments to be placed in a public garden near Florence. This honour had been gained

over many names longer known and more celebrated than his own; and the triumph had not been small.

Yet for the sake of a smile from Detta—not such a smile as she gave him now unasked and unstintingly, frank as a friend's and affectionate as a sister's—but the shy responsive smile of one who knew and reciprocated his love—for the sake of such a smile, the young sculptor, dear as was his art to him and perseveringly as he had toiled to reach its heights, would have sacrificed ambition, position and success. It was one of the peculiarities of his nature that he did not shrink from acknowledging this fact to himself, and regarded his love, though rejected, rather as a thing to be proud of, than as something to be crushed down and hidden away like an evil disgrace, in the dark and unvisited corners of memory.

If Benedetta could not love him—if this ideal of his fancy, his passion, and his hope could find in herself no responsive echo, however faint, to the feelings with which he

regarded her, he was alas! to be pitied, but she not blamed. Nay, perhaps all the more for the maidenly coldness which refused to be touched, was she fit to be enshrined with every precious jewel of reverence, and set upon her pedestal high up amongst the angels, like another fair Beatrice, worshipped by the dream of the poet, and untarnished by earthly possession.

But, vain though his instinct told him was the attempt, the young man could not find it in his heart to leave Rome without once again convincing himself from her own lips of her indifference.

Very gently, almost timidly he spoke, on returning home from an evening stroll the night before he left, the very tone of his voice making Benedetta's task easier and yet harder to perform—easier, inasmuch as it told her how little hope he had, and harder, from its very humility.

Her reply was very sorrowful. Her dear brother Ino, her kind and loyal companion, the friend of whom she was so proud—why must he seek to be anything more? And yet,

how sincerely she loved him! But, even while she was for a moment hesitating, listening sadly to his tender words, and debating within herself as to whether, by this repeated rejection of a love so strong, so faithful, and so unselfish, she was not doing a wrong to both herself and him—one of those instincts which so often rise to guide us in moments of doubt and danger, and which are so entirely irrespective of the slower course of reasoning, swept across her mind and spoke out in words.

She was not cold; something within her told her that the same fire, although dormant, lay within her breast; but not to be stirred into flame by the pleadings of her old friend and playmate.

And was it a suspicion the next moment, a dread, or a newly awakened joy, which brought the sudden colour to her cheeks, and the soft light to her eyes, as for an instant Rafaelino's earnest face and eager words faded in another swift, brief vision of the past. What a selfish thing is dawning love as a rule, even in the gentlest and most generous

heart! How much it bleeds for itself, and how little for others; and how small account it takes of the wounded susceptibilities, maybe the broken hearts, over which it steps so carelessly and hastily on the way to its own goal!

Ino's love was not of this nature; it was of that nobler kind, perhaps rarely met with save among men of poetic temperament, in which the lover is content to obliterate himself for the sake of her he loves, and to resign himself even to rejection sooner than to a happiness which may mean the less full and perfect developement of life to her.

Yet never was rejection put more tenderly, affection speak more sincerely from the eyes of any woman than they did from those of Benedetta Campbell; and Ino returned to his work at Florence touched rather than wounded; loving the girl, if possible, more deeply and reverently than ever, and with her words of soothing flattery still lingering in his ears.

"I wish," said the Maestro, the evening after his departure, "that Ino had been able

to stay a little longer. It is very dull for you, my Piccola, alone with me."

"I am very happy, dear Maestro, now that the weather is cooler and one can sleep at nights."

"Ah! but it is drear for a young thing like you, now everyone is gone. It would be different if he were always here."

"He is a dear good fellow," said Detta. "We both miss him; do we not, Maestro?"

"He has been like a son to me," said the old man. "And you, my Piccola, are as my daughter. I had hoped—but now, I do not know—" he paused and passed his hand wearily across his brow.

"Maestro mio," she said, "the sky is so glorious—bars of gold standing out against great masses of black and purple mountains; I think we shall have a storm to-night."

"Perhaps," he replied absently, his thoughts evidently still following their own train. "It is strange," he murmured half to himself, and speaking aloud his inner reflections after a habit common with the blind—"I could not be deceived; I know the

sound of his voice so well. Piccola, my child," and his hand sought hers, "I know he loves you. And you—can you not return his love?"

"I love him dearly, very dearly, Maestro; but not in that way. How I wish I could! it would make you happy too, dear, as well as him."

"It would have made me very happy."

"I hate myself!" said poor Detta with a burst of remorse.

"Nay, it is not your fault, child, if you cannot. But it is strange; for they tell me Ino's face is as beautiful as I know his heart to be noble."

"He is everything," she said, "both in appearance and character that any woman could wish for. Oh! Maestro, I am foolish; I deserve blame. But he is only a dear brother to me."

"Well, well," said Cortauld sadly, "it can't be helped. Do not grieve about it, little one. It would have been a great joy to me to have seen my two children made one; but God knows we cannot always dispose circumstances

in this life to our fancy. Perhaps in England there is someone——”

“No, O, no!” exclaimed Detta with unnecessary haste, and a burning blush unseen by her companion.

“You must go back to your friends in England soon, my Piccola; this is not a fit place for one so young as you. The burden and melancholy of old age should not be thrust upon the shoulders of youth. Loneliness and poverty—loneliness and poverty——” he muttered sadly to himself.

“I am not going to leave you, Maestro! Do you want to get rid of me? I shall stay with you until you are much better—so long as I am any comfort to you.”

“I shall never be any better, Benedetta; I shall never walk through the streets of Rome again, and hear the sound of the dripping fountains, or the band playing on the Pincian Hill—never again breathe the sweet Campagnan air. I shall never leave this room until I am carried out of it. But you, my child, you must not drag your life on here alone; you must go back and be gay once

more in England. What do a few months of solitude, more or less, matter to an old man with one foot already in the grave? But, if it should have pleased God that it could be otherwise, and that you should have loved Ino—" Detta drew her little stool nearer, and flinging her arm about him, laid her head upon his knees.

"You are sad to-night, Maestro," she said softly; "chase away the evil spirit! I will never leave you, and you need not fear for me. When winter comes there will be plenty of life and change about us. And Ino himself will be returning soon after Christmas, so he says."

"Ah!" said the old man, only half heeding her words, "it is a sad world; how few things go straight in it! You are good, and Ino is good; you are both young and beautiful and seem made for each other. But, so it is. You will probably each of you marry someone far less worthy of you. What you are to him, Piccola," he went on dreamily, "such was your mother once to me. I loved her dearly—most tenderly; but to her I was an

old man and unattractive. It was natural she should prefer your father. There was no rivalry, ah, no! I doubt if your father even knew I loved her. I never spoke to him about it. He was so generous that the thought of possessing anything I had once wished to gain would have been painful to him. These things are bitter to a man at the time, but Time is the great healer; and the day comes when one can speak of it as I do to you now, without trouble—when it seems to one more as some dream vision, or the story of another life, than as something which has been really part of the wear and tear of one's own existence."

Benedetta did not speak; she only gently carressed the hand which lay upon his knee. The story she had just heard was new to her, and she was not unmoved by it. She made no comment however; feeling only another bond of union between herself and her old guardian.

And presently the Maestro—as he usually did when anything had occurred to trouble him—stretched out his hand for the violin

which was never far away, and began playing softly, with a lingering tender touch, such as a mother might use in stroking the little downy rings of hair upon the forehead of her babe.

“Sing to me,” he said after awhile. And Detta’s voice rose and fell amidst the lengthening shadows of the long room, the violin wailing an accompaniment, that sometimes followed her strong notes almost inaudibly, and sometimes swelled into a duet of passionate force, seeming to contend for the mastery of each note with the human organ.



CHAPTER XII.

DO I LOVE HIM?

SEPTEMBER was now drawing to a close, and the unusually severe heat showed signs of abating. A few showers had fallen upon the parched and weary ground, the fever was dying out, and it was possible for the inhabitants to stir abroad at noonday without imminent risk of sunstroke. Benedetta was beginning to disregard the thermometer, or to grow hardened to its excesses. Her principal enjoyment now, was in the solitary walks which day by day grew longer, and which she extended in every direction about the city. Often, as she wandered down the Via Appia, looking out across the swelling Campagna towards Albano, she recalled the childish rambles years ago, when she and Ino had been used to clamber up to the top

of that broken tomb, sitting there to watch the sunset, whilst he pointed out to her the windows of the distant houses shining like little sparks of fire; or, sauntering past the Coliseum, between shady walls and beyond the custom house, bethought herself how often she had laughed to see the soldiers, intent upon the discovery of forbidden wares, plunging their weapons into the various contents of the many passing carts—the dark-eyed, red-kerchiefed contadino not relaxing one lazy muscle, and barely unbuttoning the corners of his sleepy eyes, as he lay stretched out full-length above the shafts, his shady hat well pressed down upon his brows.

At other time she would stroll into the picture-galleries or museums, and round about the crumbling ruins, devouring with silent delight the grand poetic beauty of these noble forms; going home to talk softly over what she had seen in the dim chamber of the Maestro, and, then lying down in her little bed in the room opposite, to re-build in her dreams the lines of architectural grandeur,

or the misty shapes of the old, tender, half mythological heroes and heroines. Or again, in the early mornings or cooler evenings, she would creep quietly through the closed leather curtain (shutting heat and sunlight, noise and the world out of some vast old church), kneeling perhaps for a few minutes by some simple peasant-woman at a quiet side altar, or sitting down in the shade of a lofty pillar to listen to the strains of the Dominican chants that came from strong, manly voices behind the screen. A solemn scene was being enacted one morning, as she turned and made her way into one of these; attracted within by the sounds which penetrated even through the leather hangings and the court-yard before the porch out into the open street, and by the sight of the huge black velvet draperies spread all over the outside wall and falling on each side of the entrance door. She pushed aside the curtain and went in. A requiem mass was being performed for some great person lately dead; and the church was filling fast, the mourners of the deceased having a special

area set apart for them, corded off in the centre aisle; whilst a crowd of curious spectators were pushing their way nearer and nearer to the high altar at the extremity. This was hung with voluminous black gauze, and illuminated by scores of huge candles, which also surrounded the velvet and wreath-covered bier placed in the centre. The singing was characterised by the pathos and beauty usual on such occasions, and Benedetta paused just within, finding herself, however, pushed gradually further and further up the building by the in-coming crowds, until she was more than half way up the aisle, and escape was no longer possible. This was no particular source of regret to her. She loved the picturesque and gorgeous magnificence of the Romish ritual, the imposing monotony of its chants, and the poetic beauty of its processions, with all the fervour and appreciation of an artistic nature; and now, as she stood there, silently and reverently, not far from from one of the great white marble pillars, her little market-basket in her hand, dressed in simple grey, with the black lace

veil which she usually wore instead of a hat falling over her dark hair and large Italian eyes, few but would have taken her for a native of the Eternal City *pur-sang*, or dreamt that, by birth and education, she was more than half an Englishwoman.

She had been there some minutes, when, happening to give a glance around her, her eye was caught and arrested by a sight common enough in the winter and early spring, but somewhat unusual at this time of the year. This was nothing more nor less than the back of an Englishman. Now it is absolutely impossible for an intelligent person to feel any more doubt about the nationality of an English back than of an English face. It might be possible to confuse that of a Spaniard and Italian, or even, more rarely, that of a Frenchman and Italian; but there is something about the back of an Englishman's neck, even more than the cut of his coat, which, whether it be for good or evil, has an unmistakeable type of its own. I am speaking, of course, of Englishmen who cut their hair and their clothes according to the

English pattern. A hybrid Bohemian, who has lived long abroad and adopted the manners and customs of his neighbours—such as the velvet collar and the long hair, lanky and straggling, or bushy and curling—disproves the theory no more than a degenerate, unclipped poodle invalidates the fact that all real poodles are clean shaven.

A good many of this but half national, hybrid sort of Englishmen—men who made their home in Rome and rarely left it summer or winter—were still to be seen about the town, and might have made their way into the crowded church ; but an unmistakeable tourist, such as this appeared to be, was more of a *rara avis* at the end of September. This might have accounted for the fact that Benedetta's eyes, having once caught sight of the tall, athletic figure, remained rooted thereupon with pardonable interest ; but it would scarcely have accounted for the sudden flush which rose to her cheeks, and the look of startled, half-pleased enquiry expressed upon her face. In another moment her doubts were set at rest. The tall figure veered

round, and making its way, quietly but persistently, towards the upper end of the building, came to a standstill a little below but nearly opposite to herself. There was no mistake now ; and Benedetta drooped her eyes suddenly, wondering what could have brought him here—if he would see her, and if so, when ?

Meanwhile, Beresford Conway, to whom the Latin chanting was not very harmonious nor very attractive, and whose behaviour, though characterised by perfect propriety, still intimated that the whole thing was to him nothing more than a gorgeous show, one of the scenic representations of a continental city, leant back against the marble pillar, his travelling-cap in his hand, taking free note of the building, its decorations, and the concourse which filled it.

His gaze had already wandered several times, unnoting, over the spot where Detta stood.

Her dress and appearance were so completely those of one of the people—

superior and refined, but still one of them—that his quick eye might probably have altogether missed seeing her had she not suddenly raised her head for a moment. She was taller than the women that surrounded her; and the slim, slight figure with the pale upraised face suddenly caught his glance, and their eyes met. There was no mistaking the look of satisfaction on Conway's countenance at the discovery; it is to be feared he even visibly smiled and nodded, and made a frantic though unavailing attempt to pierce the close ranks of those around him in order to approach her neighbourhood. It was quite impossible, however; and he had to remain where he was, contenting himself with the refreshing sight of the sweet, blushing face, and the long dark lashes which so provokingly hid eyes which, having once encountered his, refused to commit that imprudence a second time. Yet she looked pleased—a sudden light had dawned upon her face, an expression of shy joy at sight of him, which showed

at any rate that his unexpected advent was not disagreeable to her.

Could it be possible that now, just when circumstances had made the thing which he desired impossible, she herself had come to regard that desire in a different light—perhaps even shared it?

It was a long time before Benedetta raised her eyes.

She felt unaccountably shy—angry with herself for the hot colour which burnt upon her cheeks, astonished at herself for the happy tumult of excitement which filled heart and brain. The loud, dismal chanting echoed on unheard, and she dared not look up; for, in all that vast crowd, one face seemed to stand out before her with overwhelming clearness, the face that she knew, although she could not see, was turned towards hers from the first moment of recognition.

Would he meet her as they went out? Would he walk home with her? What would he say to her? Why had he come to Rome now when nobody came?

The music swelled on, and the procession, with its line of white and scarlet figures bearing the lofty candlesticks and the swinging censers, passed round and round. She did not notice them much; she was wondering when the service would be over. It might have been a few minutes, it might have been half-an-hour, she did not know—when suddenly she was aroused from her dreams by a sudden shriek, a sudden rush, an awful wave of terror which had reached and infected her before she even saw the cause.

How had it happened? Had one of the boys slipped and fallen? Had it been a gust of wind, or mere carelessness in the holding of one of the great blazing candles? The black gauze curtains were alight, and the flame was already leaping up towards the roof.

In one second all was horror and confusion—the hoarse voices of terrified men, the shrieks of frantic women, as the great living wave came pressing, pouring down from the east end, fighting its way towards

the entrance doors at the bottom of the church.

Detta had no power to resist the moving throng, she was already being carried onward, almost off her feet, a terrible dread in her heart—not so much of the flames as of this great human weight pressing life and breath and power out of her.

Her presence of mind was leaving her—she was but a slim, weak girl, and she felt an appalling certainty that in another few moments her feeble powers of resistance would give way, she should lose consciousness, and get knocked down and trampled upon by the half-maddened crowd. At this moment a voice fell upon her ear, the clear, calm, high tones of an English voice, sounding strangely distinct above the general uproar.

“Detta,” it said, “cling to that pillar. You will be pushed against it in a moment. Hold on till I reach you.”

The words seemed to give her new life and courage—he was coming to her assistance!

She raised her eyes to discover the pillar, and with a desperate effort, as the crowd swept past, caught it with both arms, and clung to the marble with the energy of desperation. What an age it seemed whilst Beresford Conway, with silent determination, made his way towards her. It was no easy matter, as may be supposed, to cross the human current, even though the girl's position allowed him to drift a little with it in its downward course, and had Mr. Conway not been tall above the average, strong and muscular, it is probable he would not have succeeded in his purpose. As it was, not only pushes, but blows—not few or far between—fell upon him from the infuriated and terrified men and women whose path he obstructed, whilst to Detta it seemed as if she could surely never hold out until he arrived to protect her from the cruel pressure which bruised and crushed her on every side. When at length he gained the spot the crowd was already abating at this upper end of the building; but there was nevertheless sore need of assistance for the half-fainting girl. With one arm Conway supported her; the

other was placed as an iron barrier to keep off the crowd. It was a good thing for Beresford Conway on this occasion that he had through life exercised his muscles rather than his brains, and notwithstanding the idle existence led for several months every year in town, that the autumn and winter had invariably been devoted to occupations of an active and sporting character, that had not allowed much deterioration in the sinews, first developed in University days upon the Isis.

“Do not be afraid,” he said consolingly in her ear. “There is nothing to fear now—no danger. The fire is burnt out, and I can keep the crowd off.”

Detta could not answer him. She could only cling to the firm arm—everything swimming before her eyes, and the confused shrieks of the crowd subdued into a buzzing in her brain. She could not have told how many minutes later it was when his voice spoke again.

“Shall you be afraid,” it said, “if I leave you for a few moments? People are all

passed—no fear of their coming back; and the fire is out.”

She glanced up with a vague terror in her eyes.

“Do you understand me?” he asked. “I want to find some means of getting you out of this place.”

For a moment she clung to his hand, feeling she could not let him go. Then the self-control which was a part of her nature came to her aid.

“Yes, go,” she said tremblingly; and he left her. Not, however, without taking the precaution of noting the exact position, and counting the number of the pillar against which she crouched, as he bid her, until his return.

Though not particularly well acquainted with foreign churches, Mr. Conway guessed that there must be some means of exit, some entrance door used by the choir and clergy, at the upper end of the building. The western end was still thronged with the panic-stricken mob, of whom but a small portion were able to make their way at a time through the three

main doors leading out upon the street portico ; and who, driven wild by excitement and terror, and misled by the wreaths of smoke that now filled the church, still pressed on one over the other, doubtless believing themselves pursued by their ghastly foe. The ecclesiastics, however, and the many brilliantly-robed members of the procession had disappeared on the first alarm, and had certainly not made their way out by the western doors, but by means of some vestry or side chapel door. Several of these Conway, half-blinded by the smoke, hastily tried and found locked, but at length put his hand upon a solid door, which, opening, showed a square of grass with a fountain in the centre and shady cloisters surrounding. It was the work of a moment to make his way back to the pillar where he had left Benedetta, and against which she had now fallen without life or consciousness. Bending down, he lifted her in his arms, and carried her out into the cool cloisters, laying her down on the stone floor at some distance from the opening from which the smoke was pouring

out, and supporting her head against his knee whilst he fanned her face as well as he could with his cap. She was terribly white and still, poor child, and at length he put her head gently down, and, running to the fountain, filled his cap with water, dashing some against her face. He was greatly relieved when this had the desired result, and her eyes once more unclosed themselves, opening with a look of terror, as she started up.

“Lie still, lie still,” he said, in no particular hurry to get rid of his burden. “You are quite safe now, and you cannot stand.”

“No,” she said, with a trembling smile, as she dropped down again into a sitting posture, “I can’t. My knees give way. It was the smoke made me faint, I think. Oh! that fire, Mr. Conway! Is anyone hurt?”

“I will go and see in a minute, when you are better,” he replied; “when you are fit to be left. I might possibly be of some use.”

Detta caught his hand instinctively.

“Don’t leave me!” she exclaimed. But she had scarcely uttered the words before she retracted them. “Go, quickly,” she said;

“I am not afraid. I am quite fit to be left now.”

“It is quite safe here,” said Beresford, “the church is not on fire; but if it were, it would be hours before the flames could reach these cloisters. Do you think,” he asked, with an expression in his eyes which, lost as she had been to all sense save that of terror, brought the faint color back into her cheeks, “I would leave you if there were any danger?”

“I am not thinking of myself—now,” she hesitated. “But you—to go back into that church!”—and she shuddered.

He smiled as he assisted her to a corner of the stone-work, where she could lean back at her ease. “Stay here till I come back,” he said; “I shall not be long.”

Very long however the time seemed to Benedetta, as she sat in the cool cloister, strength and courage gradually returning to her, and the soft breeze blowing over her forehead, waiting for his return.

Shouts and screams could still be heard faintly from the other end of the great building, and mingled strangely and terribly

with the refreshing drip-drip of the fountain, and the song of the little bird, which having drunk his fill, had perched himself upon the stone coping beneath one of the arches close by.

It was dreadful to hear these sounds, although softened by distance and becoming less frequent. "I must try to do something for them," thought the girl, rising instinctively. But as she approached the door-way, she grew giddy and her limbs failed her, and she acknowledged to herself with shame and humiliation that she dared not re-enter the smoke-filled church. She knew that she would have lost her way as well as her presence of mind had she attempted to do so. Once more she flung herself down on the rough stone benching that lined the cloisters, trembling from head to foot. Was he perhaps risking his life in his efforts to assist others? How long would he be? Solitude and inaction were doubly terrible as she realised that the awful scene from which she had been rescued was not yet over. But in truth, the sounds were now

dying away, and were followed by a pause, a silent hush, that was almost equally trying to the tension of her nerves. It was all over now—would he never—never come? She had, in despair, just given him up, and was gazing in every direction for some means of egress from her present retreat, other than through the church itself, when the welcome footstep once more sounded behind her and he came towards her.

His features were a little paler than usual; and both hands and face showed signs of the charred tinder which was falling thickly in the church.

“It is all right now,” he said gently; “everyone is out, and you can go home whenever you like. But I think you had much better stop and rest here in the shade a little first.”

“Is anyone hurt much?” she enquired.

He paused a moment before he replied. “No one is killed,” he said; not liking to tell her that more than one was thought to be fatally injured. “Of course a good many were knocked down, especially women, and

got trampled on. But all are safely removed now to their homes or the hospital."

"How strange it seems," said Detta with compassionate eyes, "that not one of them should have thought of trying to get out this way, as you did."

"Everyone follows the other in a panic," said Beresford; "no one thinks. And indeed this narrow door would have been comparatively useless. A dozen people would have blocked it up in a rush."

"What made you think of it?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I should probably have remained in the church for my own part," he replied. "I saw from the first it was only a scare, and that the fire could not spread. There was nothing for it to lay hold of when once those hangings were exhausted. But the panic of a crowd is a very real danger for any but the strongest."

"It would have killed me," said Detta simply. "I was losing my senses when you called to me. "If you had not come up when you did, I should have been pulled down—I felt myself giving way."

“Thank God, I happened to be there!” he replied, as she rose from her seat. “Take my arm, and let us stroll up and down these cloisters a little. It will be better for you than returning home at once after your shock.”

Scenes such as the foregoing—a peril shared, and one in which the man has been the protector and possibly the saviour of the woman—make ordinary conversation difficult, and rub off all the superficial varnish which usually coats the social intercourse of man and woman.

Mr. Conway’s calm and kindly manner, however, soon toned down Benedetta’s excitement, and restored her to something like everyday looks and feelings; but a little self-consciousness, which she strove in vain to conquer, underlay her tones, and made her more afraid than usual of raising her eyes to his. Every now and then, mingling in their quiet talk, came the remembrance of the tenderness with which he had held her in his arms, the expression she had caught upon his face on re-opening her terrified eyes, and

the sound of his voice as he had soothed her first alarm. It was impossible to misread these signs; and the question which had troubled her mind, perhaps foolishly, some months before, was now fully answered. Whether he spoke to her again or not, whether he once more pressed her to be his wife, or left Rome without a word upon the subject, Benedetta knew that he still loved her. Perhaps she was conscious, too, of a new feeling in her own breast awakened by this knowledge—a feeling which was far from being a joyless one, and yet which gave her an unusual timidity, a strange reserve.

Their conversation, however, was far from turning upon any subject of a tender or sentimental nature, for Mr. Conway was telling her the reason of his leaving England, which reason appeared to be of a practical nature—and the condition generally of his affairs, which seemed to be, as he expressed it, “altogether wrong-side foremost and in a precious muddle.”

Whilst doing this he kept his eyes open, and presently discovered a side door in the

cloisters, which, opening upon some stone passages, eventually let them out into the sunny street, quite out of sight of the portico through which they had both entered the church that morning, unsuspecting of the tragedy about to be enacted before their eyes.

He purposely led her on into a quiet, narrow street in the opposite direction, continuing his talk without interruption. The substance of his information was as follows:

There had, as he expressed it, been a blow-up between his father and himself, a "general worry all round," and he had ended by declining, perhaps foolishly, the Irish agency.

"It is no fault of mine," he remarked, "that that thief of a lawyer has run off with the best part of my income as well as cousin Fanny's. A man must, I suppose, stand a good deal of nonsense when it is talked by his father; but there are limits to human patience. It isn't pleasant to be regarded in the light—a—of a pauper, supported by

family charity. So I told my father I should cut the country, and he might spare the rest of his exordium. It can't matter to him whether I choose to be solvent or insolvent, so long as I am off his hands, and support myself in another country, which is what I intend trying to do. So next week I start for Africa."

"To Africa!" repeated Detta, with a startled look.

"Yes, to the Cape. I have given a thought to the colonies all round, and have come to the conclusion that will suit best. If one is to kick over society and the comforts of life, one may as well go in for the whole hog at once. I think I shall work my way up to the diamond mines. Those miner fellows don't seem a bad sort, except for their drink, and there will be some novelty and excitement in the life to make up for the roughing. But on the whole, I think roughing it will be rather a pleasing sensation than otherwise. One grows sick of the want of change in this hum-drum English life."

It was not unpleasant to Beresford Conway

to discuss his affairs after this fashion with his present companion, for he felt that he carried her interest and sympathy along with him, and that her very silence might possibly now bear witness to the existence of some little feeling of regret which she was too shy to express in words.

“It seems a long way to go,” she said at length, driven to answer by his prolonged pause, but without looking up.

“Distance is a matter of little moment now-a-days,” he said, “especially to a man ; but, perhaps, out in such a place as that the remembrance of one’s old friends will be a more grateful recollection than in less out-of-the-way regions. And one naturally wants to say good-bye before one starts, to anyone whom, in short, one cares about.” There was a moment’s silence, whilst the suspicion, before only half admitted, now forced itself as a certainty upon Detta’s mind—he had come all this way to say good-bye to her—just to see her again.

The next moment he spoke as if in answer to her thoughts.

“Do you remember that day I came over to Steynton Court, when I and my friend were—a—making a little tour to see the Yorkshire abbeys?”

And notwithstanding the keen look with which he tried to read the expression of her face, a little smile curled his lips as he spoke.

“Well, you remember what I said to you that day? In short,” he added abruptly, “I asked you to be my wife.”

“Yes, I remember,” she said in a low voice.

“And you refused me. I fancied then that there might be some one else—perhaps you can guess who. But I have come to the conclusion since that it was not so, and that it was my own want of attractiveness that repelled you.”

Detta winced at his plain words; and it was possible that he saw the wince, and went on, not ill-satisfied with this result of a judicious self-abuse.

“I told you then that I should try again; a resolution in which Eva, who has much

too good an opinion of me, has encouraged me. Then," he continued, his eyes still fixed upon her, "there came this smash; and now it is out of my power to ask any woman to share my fortunes—for the simple reason that I haven't any. A hut in the colonies or a tent pitched on the African plains is scarcely a sufficient inducement. Perhaps some persons would say I have no right to name the subject again, more especially as you told me last time that you—a—didn't want me or my offer; but all the same I thought I would. It is just this," he went on, speaking with a sort of jerk which may have been the result of nervousness or some unaccustomed feeling: "I wish it as much as I did; in fact, I think I wish it more every day. I am a bad fellow at putting feelings into words, and never had the gift of speech, but perhaps you can guess I mean more than I say. I'm not worth much myself, I daresay; and at present my income is worth still less. But all that may be different some day. And even now, I fancy, if there were an object to work for,

I could get on and manage something in a country where health and strength count for more than genius. Of course I don't ask you to engage yourself to me ; but if you could, in any way, without considering yourself bound, give me a word of hope, it would—be a comfort. And," he concluded practically, "it would of course bring me back to you so soon as there was any decent prospect to offer."

Detta made no reply. Various feelings were contending within her. It was by no means so easy a matter to answer him now as it had been that first time. Why should she find it so hard to reiterate the response which surely would be the best at any rate for him? Why should a few months alter her determination? Nothing had occurred to change the face of the matter.

And yet she felt unmistakeably that there was a change somewhere ; and that now it would be a pain to her to send him away without the kindly word for which he asked.

But surely it would be most unfair to link herself now to the man whom in his prosperity and wealth she had refused, and cast herself as a burden upon him just when he was about for the first time to start in the real race for life, and fight his way through the opposing forces of poverty, competition, and unaccustomed conditions of existence. She and the Maestro led but a lonely life of it here in the old city—she had, she knew, sometimes yearned for youth and brightness and change—it was, she told herself, just because she was dull that her heart had that morning leapt with joy at the sight of Beresford Conway's friendly face.

Was it not selfishness now that tempted her to accede to his request, and shackle him with a new bond which would assuredly be no assistance, as he said, but rather a drag in his new life? Something within her told her it must be yes or no; she could not give him the "one word" for which he asked, without, she knew, giving him more.

After a moment's struggle, she raised her head and answered him firmly :

"No," she said ; "let things be as they were ; it is better so. You will always be a friend to me, Mr. Conway—a kind, good friend ; but—" and her voice trembled a little, "but nothing more. Please do not ask anything else."

The words were clear enough ; yet somehow they did not convey to his mind the exact impression which she had intended. Notwithstanding the low value at which he rated his own mental capacities, there must have been a certain amount of shrewdness about the ex-votary of fashion—born perhaps of a constant social intercourse with the other sex—which assisted him to bear this rebuff with a certain fortitude, and even to penetrate beneath the surface of Benedetta's manner, and guess, after some fashion, at the perplexed condition of her thoughts.

Anyhow, he did not seem much cast down by her reply ; and his conduct

under the circumstances was of a cheerful nature.

He did not, as Detta had feared he would, appear to be angry or even hurt by her conduct.

And as they strolled on through the quiet streets, it seemed to be her part rather than his, to feel discomfited and somewhat saddened.

“Very well,” he had said quietly, “perhaps you are right. I will say nothing more. But that will not prevent me thinking of it, you know.”

Now, as they walked on, he continued to converse with her on other matters, after a kind and friendly fashion; interesting himself in the details of her daily life and her account of her blind companion, and forcing her to talk to him as if no subject of any special importance had the last few minutes been broached between them.

Presently they came to the corner of the Tre Fontani street; and Detta paused for a moment and pointed out a house to her companion.

“That,” she said, shyly, “was the house in which my mother lived; and there, in that room down below—it is a private house now — my grandfather kept his bric-à-brac collection. He was only a shopkeeper, you know,” she said, glancing up at Conway.

“Like the grandfathers of a great many of our English nobility,” he remarked; an observation which, Detta was half-ashamed to feel, fell pleasantly enough upon her ears. She had somehow dreaded lest her companion might despise her for her origin; and acknowledged to a corresponding relief. Yet what could it matter to her whether or no Mr. Conway looked down upon her origin? He was going away to Africa—she had told him to think no more of her—possibly she might never see him again. This reflection kept her strangely silent as they made their way through the Piazza di Spagna and into the narrow street where, at the entrance of the old Palazzo, her companion paused.

“I will leave you here now,” he said;

“you must go and rest after your shock. I fear I have tired you out with this long walk.”

“No, it has done me good. But will you not come in and see the Maestro?”

“Not now; but if I may, I will come again this evening for a few minutes, just to say good-bye. I must be off to-morrow morning.”

Benedetta and her old friend had but just sat down to the frugal repast which they called their supper, when the visitor, true to his word, arrived.

The Maestro had been told of his advent, and made him welcome with the half-melancholy dignity natural to his manner; and Beresford was asked to share the exceedingly simple meal. It consisted merely of some rolls of bread, a dish piled up with grapes, and a bottle of the thin, acid, native wine.

The visitor had dined late, but did not refuse the invitation, and drew his chair opposite to the Maestro's, answering his queries regarding England, English life, and the progress of English music, with

a care and a courtesy for which Benedetta told herself she would scarcely have given him credit. Truth was, to Mr. Conway, the blind musician in his sorrowful helplessness, seemed an object for respect and tenderness, greater than any usually brought before his notice amongst the luxuriously attended old people in his former circle of acquaintance.

There was something about this old man with his snow-white hair, his closed eyes, and the lines of deep care upon his furrowed countenance, which, harmonising as they did with the plainness of his dress and the half-furnished bareness of the room, served to make up an ensemble not wanting in pathos, and which seemed to arouse the innate chivalry of the man who had lived in so different a sphere.

The poverty of the room was so unlike English poverty; the toil and trouble written upon the old man's face, had about them nothing sordid; the very paucity of the meal to which he had been invited as graciously as if to a sumptuous

repast, displayed itself rather by a picturesque simplicity than by any vulgarity of its surroundings; while Detta herself, her slight figure clad in the clinging grey dress, her movements noiseless, and her Italian-sounding voice soft and sweet, filled in the foreground of the picture, giving the whole a touch of poetic warmth and colour.

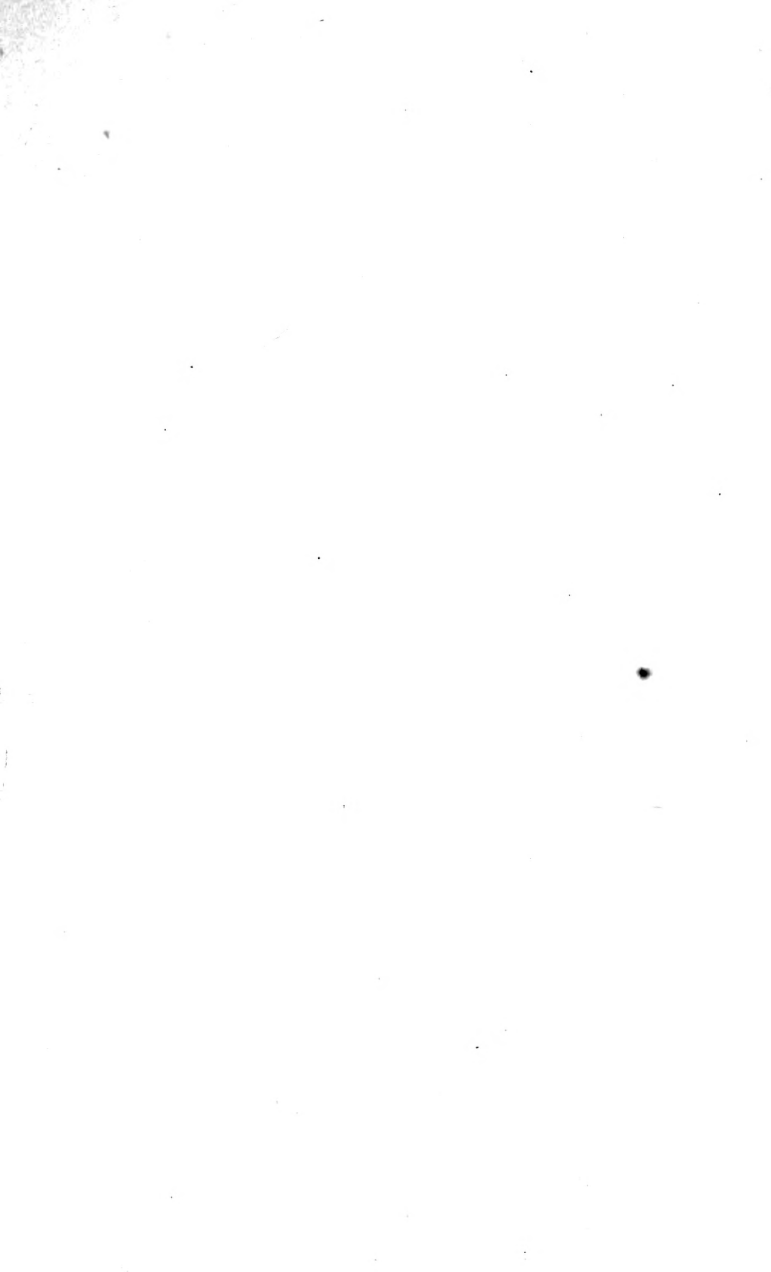
The twilight deepened, as the Englishman sat gazing at the scene before him; by degrees more and more absorbed in the sensation of a dream, and finding it hard to realise here a fact in which poverty, old age, and suffering played conspicuous parts. It was with an effort that at length he roused himself, and rose to go; telling himself that the remembrance of that evening meal with Benedetta and her Maestro, would probably long remain in a corner of his memory, and re-visit him amid the engrossing interests of a new career.

"Good-bye," he said. "God bless you," he whispered in a lower tone.

And for a moment he kept her hand in his. Then there was a kindly farewell from the

Maestro; and Conway. went down the passage and began descending the endless staircase, to emerge once more out of dreamland into the noisy streets full of damp evening mists and of the practical every-day life and atmosphere, which even in Rome, the city of gods and heroes, romance and art, has as true an existence as in more prosaic towns.

END OF VOLUME II.

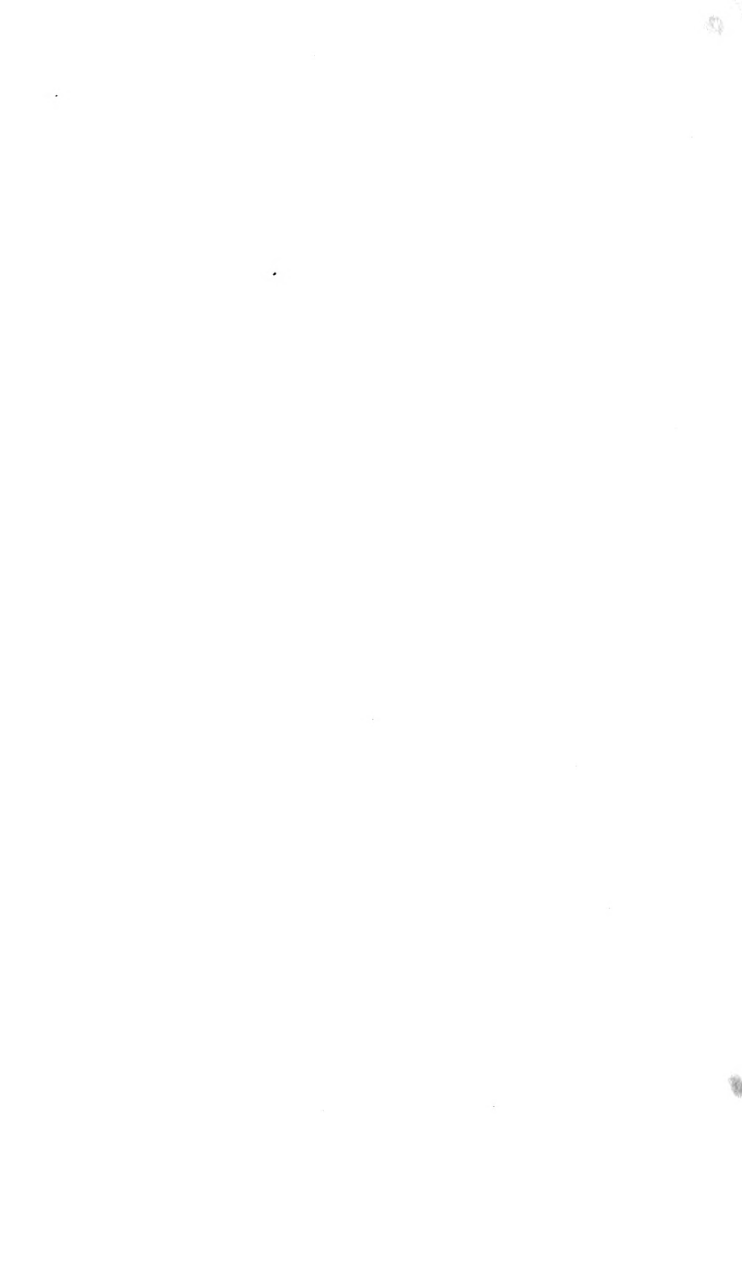


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